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HARD LUCK HELLER
by Laurence Donovan

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HARD-LUCK

RAUCOUS, ribald voices were only a blurred roaring in Conway's ears, he was that hungry. That last long swig of redeye had dulled his blinding hangover some, but it had also awakened all the pangs of nigh sixty grubless hours.

Conway scrubbed with grimy knuckles at the thick beard that appeared to have overgrown his sense of hearing as well as giving him the disreputable look of a rangetown saddle bum. Only he recalled vaguely that he couldn't be a saddle bum because he hadn't any horse.

One hostile voice was raised above the others. By concentrating upon it, maintaining a precarious balance by holding onto the edge of the bar, Conway made out it was the sneering mouth of the half-greaser bartender who was speaking. It seemed to Conway that the speech was directed at him.

"I stake a drunken galoot to one drink, no more!" the bartender snarled contemptuously. "Now yuh can either git to swampin' out the place, or yuh can git out! I p'fer yuh git out!"

No, it couldn't be to him the bartender was meaning. Not Tom Conway, once champion trick rider and fancy deadshot of the big-time rodeo circuit. Nobody ever talked to Tom Conway like that.

"Y'hear me, yuh moochin' sot!" The bartender's insulting tone was turning the heads of cowpokes, townies, and trail

HELLER . . .

To be a footloose cowpoke, broke and hungry, is plenty bad enough. Tom Conway, ex-champion rodeo performer, found that out. But when the world started to kick him around, he had to fight back—and he promptly fought himself into a jam to top anything ever seen in those parts!

Smoke shot out from the bandage on his arm. The lead ripped hard.

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

riders crowding the Red Ace soloon. "I said, git out, *pronto!*"

HE HAD reached the utter depths of humiliation. Ten long years of bone-break riding, of continuous gun-sling-

ing practice, had carried him to the top. Two weeks of trying to rub Lola Deming, the rodeo girl with more of a yen for another man's riches than for romance, out of his life and his mind had brought him to the bottom.

"I'm just goin'," muttered Conway, trying to put on an air of injured dignity that got him only coarse guffaws from the crowd.

His scuffed boots, one with a heel missing, caused him to trip and stumble in what he meant to be a dignified departure. His cactus-ripped levis and sweated, dirty shirt effectively covered his lean, dangerous strength.

"Looks as how the damn' tramp has a ramrod down his yeller back!" bellowed a six-foot cowpuncher whose bloodshot eyes were on a level with Conway's. "Gi' the bum another whiskey, Pete, an' he'll think he owns Brazos! Haw! Haw!"

"Brazos?" Conway halted, holding onto his balance with an effort.

Now he remembered. A Mex sheepherder had told him the only law in Red Rock county law with the sheriff of Brazos. That was why he had limped the last twenty miles, weak with hunger, dizzy with the hangover of a two weeks' unbroken drunk.

He had been afoot for three days before that last twenty miles. The final folding money of his two thousand stake, his horse and its five-hundred-dollar rigging, his silver-inlaid, fancy sixes with the sure shooting target barrels—all of this was behind him.

All of his worldly possessions, except his ragged duds, had been stripped from him at the faro table in *Mezquite*, which was the one other town in range-rich Red Rock county. After that, less than half conscious, he had been run out of town.

No. He had been dumped on a badlands trail outside the town's limits. He had been pulled off his own horse, across which he had been laid limply, and left lying in a cactus patch.

This recollection made a confused whirligig in Conway's saturated brain as he repeated the word, Brazos?"

"An' what if it is Brazos?" sneered the bartender. "Yore kind ain't wanted here! Now git out!"

But Conway had the persistence of a normally quiet and competent fellow who had long been accustomed to relying upon uncanny speed with his guns and fists. That he was now unarmed, weak and partly paralyzed from the redeye in his veins, did not turn aside his purpose.

"Is the sheriff in town?" he said, his manner and words producing a sudden pool of silence about him.

There was a sudden peal of hard laughter. The big cowpuncher with the bloodshot eyes stepped in front of him.

"Hey, lookit what's honin' to see the sheriff!" The puncher's hand darted out and seized Conway's dirty shirt, twisting it into a bunch. "Fella, if Sheriff Sellers was in Brazos, a whiskey-beggin' bum like you wouldn't be!"

Punchers and trail riders and townies whooped mockingly. Conway's stomach weakness was overcome momentarily. One fist jabbed an unexpected punch into the big puncher's belly. As the puncher grunted and doubled, his head was snapped back by a fist that traveled to his chin so fast nobody could see it.

Nearly two hundred pounds of surprised cowpoke went down, his head striking the brass footrail of the bar. He rolled over and did not get up.

There was an interval of quiet, then the bartender yelled.

"The sneaking son hit 'im foul—git 'im!"

CONWAY'S flash of power faded at seeing what he had done. His arms failed him. His arms were hammered down as he tried to guard his face. He was nearly blinded when he was propelled through the batwing doors, falling flat on his back.

Conway shook his head, getting to his hands and knees when his attackers stopped at the saloon doors. He was on the planks of the sidewalk, clawing for balance in oozy mud that had been tracked up from the rain-mired street.

He first became conscious of small feet and trim ankles. There was a lacy froth of white petticoats as a bunched skirt

was held up from contact with the dirty walk.

Conway managed to get up, swaying. He saw a tall, dignified rooster with a hawkish nose and thin, scornful lips showing above a fancy vest with white braiding. A hard hat placed the man as some citizen of importance, but Conway passed him over.

The girl was slim, young, and shapely, with a dark, pretty face.

"I didn't mean—sorry, miss—" Conway's speech was thick through his puffed lips. "Y' see, I stumbled."

"Get outa the way, you whiskey sot!" rasped the man. "Come on, Margaret. This hellhole needs to be cleaned out."

Perhaps Conway did not quite realize the appearance he made, standing there. In the girl's eyes he must have represented something a shade lower in humanity than she had previously encountered.

The girl stepped aside to avoid possible contact and held her head high and her dark eyes averted as she passed on. Conway stood there a moment, blinking stupidly.

"That's what I've become," he muttered, and turned, looking up the single street.

It was late and there were lights in only a few of the straggling buildings. He could see the black-lettered sign that said EATERY.

The encounter in the saloon, the shock of the girl's contemptuous avoidance of him, and the cold misery of a light rain drizzling upon his hatless head had brought keener consciousness of the worst hangover he had ever known. The one drink in the Red Ace had only made his suffering keener.

Plodding along the sidewalk, limping on the heelless boot, Conway came to keener realization that it was but a short, straight drop from the top to the utmost bottom. He could not know that this night had yet to prove to him he had not by any means scraped all of the hard luck barrel.

The roaring of a flooded creek at the rear of one long row of buildings seemed to mingle with the buzzing in his own head. From a half open door of the Eatery restaurant came the tantalizing odor of frying steak, and it dizzied him to the point of holding onto the wall of a building to steady himself.

He went on up the street, looking across at the deserted frame courthouse and the jail. There was one light in the jail office, but when he tried the door it was locked.

Conway recalled it had been said in the saloon that the sheriff was out of town. Bone-tired and hungry to the point of nausea, Conway guessed he must try and find some dry corner and reach for some sleep.

Fumbling in his pockets, he had still another shock. His fingers touched a cold, round half dollar. He got it out, clutching it with unbelief.

He almost forgot his dizziness as he stumbled toward the Eatery. Approaching the half open door, Conway scarcely noticed the tall figure entering ahead of him. He was pushing the door open for himself when his gaze went to the end of the short counter.

THE waitress was buxom and blonde. Her hair was frowsy, but she had a plump, passably pretty face. As Conway saw it, the tall man entering ahead of him had reached over the counter and was pulling the girl toward him forcibly.

The girl's eyes flashed to him, and Conway imagined her look was an appeal. He forgot all that had passed, and his own unpopular status in this town of Brazos.

With two long strides Conway reached the man whose back was toward him. The girl cried out as Conway gripped the man's shoulder, twisting him about.

The face that came around was that of the hawkish-nosed gent in the fancy vest.

"What do you think—so it's you again!"

The man rapped out the words. At the same time the girl's cry became unexpected words.

"Well, of all things! Throw the bum out, Corley! It's getting so a girl can't—"

Conway got it. The girl's tone was indignant, but her anger was directed at him, at his interruption of this little byplay to which she must have been a willing party.

His understanding caused Conway to hesitate. Before he could recover, hard knuckles smashed into his face. He went down and his breath left him as the other man's toe caught him in the short-ribs.

The hand gripping his collar was steel strong. For the second time Conway found himself on his back on a Brazos sidewalk.

He got up slowly. The tall man who had knocked him down, called Corley by the blonde flirt in the restaurant, was striding away. And the restaurant door slammed shut, with the rasping of a bolt.

Seconds later, Conway discovered the locking of the door meant nothing. His single half dollar had been spun from his hand when he fell.

Blood trickled from Conway's nose. He made his way along the buildings behind which the flooded creek tumbled. There was a vacant stretch where half a dozen horses were tied. Back of this loomed a wagon shed with an open front.

Perhaps here was a temporary haven where he might stay dry and grab some sleep, thought Conway bitterly. The shed was almost concealed from the street by a single building with barred windows, marking it as the town bank.

Conway was trudging into the mud by the tie rack when an oldster with a long beard came weaving toward the horses.

"Hiya, stranger!" the oldster greeted thickly. "Ain't yuh the tramp they put upon in the saloon? Bet yuh're thirsty as sin. An' I got jest what yuh need. Here, yuh take one o' these bottles. I'd sure 'nough fall off my hoss if'n I kept both 'quarts."

The oldster laughed drunkenly, pushed the whiskey into Conway's hands, then turned and climbed into the saddle. He was gone before the dazed Conway could have protested, even if he had been so minded.

"At long last—long last," he muttered. "Maybe it's a sign my luck's changing'."

CHAPTER II

Fortune Is Funny

THREE LONG, potent swigs from the bottle and downright exhaustion lulled Conway into uneasy slumber. A few forksful of damp hay made a fairly good bed in the darkness of the shed. The noise of the flooding creek, below the cutbank on which the shed stood, was a lullabye.

Conway dropped off, temporary courage heating his blood. He had the happy knowledge that half of the quart of redeye remained to open his eyes come morning, or, more safely, a little before daylight.

Tromping of a horse nipped Conway's booted foot and awakened him. He could not have slept long for the stimulation of his goodnight drinks was still with him.

Conway had the good sense to remain motionless. He saw that three saddled horses had been tied to a pole under the shed. It had been his good fortune that a light had not been used.

There were voices then. They sounded outside, a few yards away. Conway got up cautionsly, edging toward the open front of the shed. There he could see the shadowy figures of two men in the light from a partly opened door.

"You wait, Bascom, till you hear the shooting, an' then have the horses ready," spoke a voice that Conway had good reason to remember.

The tone had the cutting edge of the hard, thin lips that had twice assailed his ears tonight. The figure in the half open door could be none other than that of the hawk-nosed Corley, of the fancy vest and of flirtatious dallying with the blonde waitress.

"Yup, I got yuh," replied the other man." But don't keep 'em too long, so's the gunnin' rousts out enough for a posse."

"Contez an' Rader know their business," said Corley sharply. "An don't try any split-up of the money, Bascom, before you make the Devil Rocks. Blacky know's there's to be seventy thousand in gold and he's to wait until I get to the Rocks tomorrow night."

"Maybe yuh ain't trustin' us, Corley,"

growled the other man. "Blacky ain't likin' it none too much that yuh ain't the guts to do the shootin' o' Contez. Leavin' Contez for Boot Hill is bein' done as a throw-off for you, so's it'll look like

Hard knuckles smashed into Conway's face and he went down.

yuh done all yuh could."

"You leave this to Blacky and me!" snapped Corley's voice. "It is Blacky Bole that wants the Mex out of the way, an' not me!"

"Jest as yuh say," replied the man Bascom. "Bring on them sacks. With Contez killed, like he was holdin' up the bank, me an' Rader are hittin' the back trail down the creek. We ain't makin' ourselves targets for ary wild shootin' in the street."

Conway's throat was suddenly dry. He had heard enough to know that Corley must be the banker. That accounted for his important appearance.

And Conway had reason to remember the name of Blacky Bole, even if he had never met the notorious outlaw who was reputed to come and go about as he pleased in Red Rock county.

In fact, Conway had lost his money, his horse, and his guns to some of the gunnies of this same Blacky Bole, back there in Mezquite. He had been sober enough to learn that, and for that reason he had pushed on to Brazos, hoping to enlist the help of the law.

Corley disappeared a few seconds. When he came back, Conway heard the unmistakable clinking of gold in two sacks that were passed over to the man Bascom.

The outlaw turned and come toward the horses. Conway made himself thin against the inner wall of the shed where it was darkest. Bascom was hurrying and did not pause to look around.

He placed the two sacks in the saddle pockets of one of the horses and strode back to the rear door of the bank.

As the banker passed over two more sacks of gold, Conway heard Bascom talking again.

"Heard Blacky say he's expectin' yuh to have the layout of the Spence ranch ready for him when yuh git yore cut on this deal, Corley. Said yuh had been shinin' up to this Spence gal long enough to git the figgers on that old safe, so's we won't be troubled to bust it with powder."

CONWAY had a wish at this moment for the fast target guns he had lost at Mezquite. He had seen enough of Banker Corley to judge that one of his habits was playing in with more than one girl.

Yet he wondered now if the pretty, dark girl called Margaret could be the Spence girl of whom Bascom had spoken?

Corley had cut back with an angry reply.

"I'll take care of the Spence matter, Bascom!" stated the banker. "That's my end of it and none of Blacky's business."

"Hold it, Corley!" rasped Bascom. "Blacky wouldn't like it if yuh got an idea of hitchin' up with Margie Spence an' maybe cuttin' it thin on your deal with him!"

Then Bascom was again coming over to place two more sacks of the bank gold in the pockets of another saddle.

Conway took a long pull at the whiskey as Bascom made his third trip back to the bank door. He was not at all clear on what he ought to do. Open honesty and resentment at Corley's earlier treatment of him directed that he upset what he could plainly understand to be a faked bank holdup.

But he had seen two guns swinging low on Bascom's thighs. He would be compelled to tackle the outlaw with empty hands, if he interfered. Added to that, no doubt Banker Corley was armed, and then two others had been mentioned as having a part in the supposed holdup.

This snapped Conway's mind to what had been said about one of the outlaws, Contez. He had been mentioned as a Mex. And evidently he was to be made the sacrifice in this faked robbery as a sure throw-off for the benefit of Corley.

Conway had little time to think. Contez might be of a kind that would not be worth saving. Yet it rubbed Conway wrong, more so than the open fact that Banker Corley was framing the holdup of his own bank for a split with the notorious Blacky Bole.

Bascom was coming toward the horses with the final two sacks of gold. Corley

Conway's hand struck and his fingers locked upon the outlaw's one good wrist.

had closed the rear door of the bank and the darkness was as black as a drizzling rain could make it.

Although he had been weakened by hunger, Conway was for the time fired by the whiskey he had consumed. Moreover, his rage helped to overcome his near exhaustion.

He could see Bascom's bulky figure vaguely. He knew the outlaw's hands were weighted by the two sacks that were to be placed in the saddle pockets of the third horse.

Conway crouched, wishing he had looked for some kind of weapon, but had no time now. Bascom passed the edge of the shed wall. His back was toward Conway as he cursed and fumbled with the saddle pockets of the third horse.

Conway crept forward, flexing his fingers, hoping his hands had the strength he would need. If he could but stun the outlaw and seize one of his guns, then reach the street in the front of the bank, he had an idea he might be in time to prevent the cold-blooded killing of the one called Contez.

Conway was about to launch himself from his toes. His foot encountered a dry bit of board and it snapped loudly. Conway jumped and Bascom whirled, cursing. The movement threw Conway off and he lashed out with a fist that

glanced off Bascom's shoulder.

"El diablo!" grated the outlaw in Mex, and Conway felt the point of a gun jerked into his ribs.

CONWAY twisted, driving a fist for the outlaw's stomach as the gun exploded. For the ensuing half minute Conway was uncertain of what happened. He felt the bite of lead across his ribs and he dropped purposely to one knee, throwing himself between two of the horses.

The outlaw was upon him then, trying to see for a finishing shot. At the same time Conway heard other shooting break out in the street. He realized now he would be too late to save a Mex outlaw named Contez who was to be the throw-off dead man for Brazos townsmen to pick up.

And Conway wasn't sure that the townsmen would not find another dead man, for Bascom's gun blazed almost in his face. Powder burned Conway's neck, but he drove ahead then, putting everything he had into what he meant as a stomach blow.

But Conway's driving fist accomplished more, much more than he intended. He felt skin rasp from his knuckles on the hard metal of the gun in the outlaw's hand.

The gun exploded again. Bascom uttered a choked cry. He came forward, his weight knocking Conway to one side.

Out in the street the fake holdup guns were still blasting. Bascom seemed to have received a mortal wound from his own iron. Conway seized that gun, pulled the other one from Bascom's holster, then changed his mind and took the filled belts off the outlaw.

The shooting had stopped out in the street. Conway could hear startled shouts from the direction of the Red Ace saloon. For a long minute Conway was motionless, listening, waiting.

"When the other gunnie shows up, I'll nail him," gritted Conway. "If I get him, then with this Bascom out, maybe dead, Brazos won't be calling me a drunken bum."

Movement on the ground in the shed turned Conway. The outlaw Bascom suddenly reared to his feet. Conway held the wounded man's guns. He could have put another bullet into him, have made sure, but now Bascom was unarmed, hurt.

Conway took a step toward him. He was too late. Perhaps Bascom had been stunned, was still in a stupor. Without a sound the outlaw sprang away, trying to run, his figure a staggering, weaving shadow.

Before he could understand Bascom's probably panicked effort to escape, the outlaw was plunging away from him directly toward the cutbank. Conway did not dare cry out, but he made a try at reaching the wounded man.

Five seconds later Conway drew himself back from the crumbling clay at the top of the bank. Bascom had gone over, falling outward and down into the roaring flood of the creek. He uttered no sound as the turbulent creek rolled on.

Conway came back to the horses in the shed. He repeated what he had said while Bascom lay wounded and, he had believed, dead.

"With this Bascom out, maybe dead, Brazos won't be calling me a drunken bum."

The setup was changed by this disappearance of the outlaw.

CHAPTER III

Gold Can Be Sticky

AS soon as he had uttered the words, "Brazos won't be calling me a drunken bum," Conway realized that he was likely to throw a loop that would tangle and ensnare him. He was momentarily in possession of three horses, their saddle pockets laden with a sum of seventy thousand in gold.

"Could be doggoned sticky gold at that," muttered Conway, as shouting out in the street informed him the townies who were awake were converging upon the bank.

Banker Corley appeared suddenly at the front corner of the building. Con-

way heard the banker gain attention.

"I plugged one o' the thieves!" announced Corley loudly. "But there were three or four of them, and the others got away! They got about all the gold on hand, maybe seventy or eighty thousand!"

Conway debated swiftly. He could take a chance and come out leading the three horses, return the gold, and denounce the banker. But could he, a stranger, branded as a drunken bum, make it good?

That was taken out of his hands. A shadow loomed at the corner of the shed. A man was there, moving slowly, trying to reach the horses.

"*Senor Bascom!*" gasped the man in a hoarse whisper. "Help me, *amigo*. I am hit. My arm is broken. Rader turned traitor, and he shot me. But I was too quick for him and he is dead."

"Yeah?" grunted Conway, his eyes accustomed to the darkness and seeing that the wounded outlaw was holding a gun upon him. "You killed Rader, Contez?"

It was not the way it had been meant to be. Conway was glad, but could not have explained why, except that he hated any sneaking gulcher, and the kind of a trick that had been intended to rub out Contez.

In that blackness Conway was able to boost Contez into a saddle. The wounded man had been called a Mex, and he had spoken so, except that his English words were those of a well-born hombre or one who had lived so many years with Americans that his accent had worn off.

"Three of the scoundrels headed out toward the mountain trail, up the street!"

Corley was directing the crowd. Curses and mixed orders indicated a posse would be formed, mostly one of half drunken cowboys and townsmen from the Red Ace saloon. The kind that would have but one idea, that of bringing the bank holdups in—dead.

The gold had become stickier than ever. And Contez was leaning weakly over the neck of his horse, fumbling at the reins.

"We must *vamosa pronto*," said Contez. "Let us go."

Conway vaulted into a saddle. He caught the reins of the third horse. He delayed purposely and Contez rode around the open shed and into an unseen trail following the top of the cutbank above the creek.

Conway heard the usual exuberant yells and shooting as the Brazos posse started in pursuit. The yells and the shooting became fainter.

"Corley was smart," whispered Conway. "And this Contez is clever and quick, or he wouldn't have gunned Rader when the trap was baited the other way. But it looks like we have a clean getaway."

TWENTY minutes and perhaps two miles later, Conway saw Contez lift himself erect in the saddle and pull up the horse. The roaring of the flood had diminished at this point. Also the rain had ceased and early, gray daylight streaked the sky.

The wounded Contez appeared to have recovered strength. He brought his horse around, as if with an effort, and then his hand whipped up with a gun pointed at Conway, whose face must still have been obscure.

"You will get down, *Senor* Bascom!" The wounded outlaw gave the unexpected order with grimness riding his voice. "You will walk the mile down to the ford. Blacky and the others will be waiting on the other side, and you will tell them that Rader is dead and that I Juan Contez, have the gold. It will be returned to those who trusted it to Corley."

Conway was thinking this might be a good solution of the whole problem. He could dismount and walk away. Contez would probably do as he had indicated. The gold would be returned, and he, Conway, could slide out of it.

But would it not be well to inform Contez of Bascom's disappearance and of his own identity? Something in the wounded outlaw's voice and manner inspired a liking for the Mexican who had been smart enough to beat a plant to kill him.

"I agree we should return the gold

to its rightful owners," said Conway quickly. "You see, Contez, I'm not Bascom. I'm—"

Contez cursed and roweled his horse alongside him. Light had increased until Conway could see the man's dark, high-boned face and his glittering eyes. He could also see the gun held steadily upon him.

"*Sangre de Dios!*" exclaimed Contez. "Then who are you? Speak quickly. Where is Bascom?"

"I am nobody, a drunken bum," said Conway quietly. "I chanced upon Banker Corley robbing his own bank. I fought with Bascom and shot him, and he is in the creek. Now I will go and you can return the gold."

"It is a trick—no—"

But Conway used the outlaw's moment of surprise and hesitation to spur his own horse suddenly forward.

He counted upon the strangely perverse conscience of Contez, who evidently had been truthful when he had said he would return the stolen loot. He was sure Contez would be slow to shoot a man who had just announced the killing of Bascom.

In that Conway was right. The gun exploded, but that was perhaps reflex action as Conway's hand struck and his fingers locked upon the outlaw's one good wrist.

The gun fell from Contez's hand and the outlaw drooped in the saddle.

"Enough, *senor*," he said painfully. "I hope you speak the truth. If so, you must hasten. Blacky Bole will be—"

Blacky Bole had apparently become suspicious. The feared outlaw leader was not waiting, as Contez had been about to say. There was the quick sound of horses plopping their feet in the muddy trail. Conway saw at least half a dozen riders appear a hundred yards down the creek.

"They'll kill you, Contez, when they find out what happened," said Conway. "We'll have to make a dash for it. Can you hang onto that beast?"

"I can hang on, *senor*," muttered Contez. "But if we go back to Brazos now, Blacky will follow us, or run us down before we get far. There's no way—"

"Stick on, Contez!" rapped out Conway. "They haven't identified us yet! Here we go!"

It was wild, desperate decision. Conway caught up the reins of Contez's beast, along with those of the riderless nag. He drove home the steel in his own horse, brought it sharply around, and sent the animal off the trail onto the cutbank.

The creek flood rolled yellow and deep in the dirty gray light. Conway clung grimly to the spare reins of the other horses as his own beast snorted and sprang off the crumbling bank.

CHAPTER IV

The Outlaw Brand

THOSE sudden, rippling drops around Tom Conway's head were not made by rain. He came to the surface, swimming, clinging to the horn of his saddle. His horse and the others had jumped and plunged some twenty feet into the deep, boiling creek.

Conway saw Contez, nearly submerged, but clinging to his horse. The shock of the fall had freed the spare reins from Conway's hands. But the three horses had headed directly for the low shore of the creek, perhaps seventy-five yards away.

"Good work, Contez," approved Conway. "Stay down. If they drill your horse, let him go and grab the other one."

Conway got at his belt with his free hand. Bascom's two guns weighted him down, but he pulled the belt clear, hooking it up over the saddle horn and hoping a brief immersion would not soak the cartridges.

He could see the line of outlaws, some dismounted, at first shooting wildly. Then he heard a bellowed command.

"Hold your fire! Don't hit them hosses! We'll never git at the saddles!"

"Blacky Bole," grunted Contez. "He'll not let us get away, *senor*. We are the fools, but you are brave."

"Hang on!" was Conway's reply. "Look! Some of them are riding down the creek. There's a low shore there. They'll come after us."

losing the horses and dived. When he had Contez gripped by the collar, he felt shoaling bottom under his feet. The three horses were already scrambling ashore and into a thick mat of willows.

Contez lay gasping, but alive as Conway rounded up the three bewildered animals. Their reins had caught, trapping them and Conway made them fast. He

Contez spoke again: "Go while you have the chance, senor!"

"It is to be expected," said Contez, his voice labored. "If you can make it out, *senor*, ride fast and don't wait. For me there is no hope."

Contez's horse partly rolled then and Contez lost his hold. Conway chanced got back to Contez, pulling him into the concealment of the Willows.

"It is no use, *senor*," said Contez weakly. "They are coming and with me you cannot escape. Take the horses and go quickly." Conway grinned, clearing

Bascom's two guns of water and reloading them with cartridges he dried as he took them from the belt.

It seemed that Contez had spoken the truth. Five of Blacky Bole's men were already in the creek, swimming their horses across the narrow space where it was deep. One rider already had his beast footed on shallows and was turning toward them.

Conway judged the distance at forty yards, elevated and triggered one of the sixes. The leading outlaw yelled, threw up his hands, and toppled into the shallow water.

Before the second outlaw could gain footing for his horse, Conway triggered again. This time it was the horse that reared up, then rolled over, carrying his rider under.

Three or four men still on the other shore began shooting with rifles. Bullets clipped the willows around Conway. Contez spoke again.

"Go, while you have the chance, *senor!* You cannot again have such luck."

Conway's third and fourth shots proved that Contez had misnamed his shooting as luck. Two more horses rolled and their riders were left to fight the flood current with frantic hands.

Only one outlaw rider remained crossing the creek. He had seen enough. He tried to turn his horse to head back for the opposite shore. Conway might have been shooting at one of the flying glass balls at a rodeo.

"Sacre Dios!" exclaimed Contez. "Never, *senor*, have I seen such shooting."

That was when Conway's fifth shot picked off the clinging rider and spared the outlaw's horse to scramble out and go loping away. There was a hasty conference across the flooded creek.

A broad figure appeared, waving, and shouting.

"Rader! Bascom! Yuh can't get away with that! We'll hunt yuh down! If you'll quit, we'll cut yuh in big an' save trouble!"

CONWAY did not reply. The sixes would not carry the distance accurately.

"Guess we'll mosey along, Contez," said Conway quietly, without replying to Blacky Bole. "They'll be some time crossin'. We can cut back up the creek, on the other side from Brazos, an' then figure out what's best to do."

"I've met some cool *hombres, senor,*" said Contez. "Yes, I think we may have the chance. Blacky is fooled. He doesn't yet know Bascom and Rader are dead, an' we are two other fellows. Who are you, *senor,* if you don't mind the question?"

"Name's Conway," and the drunken bum of Brazos grinned. "I picked up some shooting tricks along my past trail. Mostly now we must find some food an' a place to hole up."

"I am trusting you, *Senor* Conway," said Contez. "I am needing the rest and my arm must be fixed. We will ride quickly to a place I know. You're no long rider, so I'll tell you that I have been. But Blacky Bole had ordered my death because he knew that I would draw the line at stealing from trusting ranchers and working with a crooked banker for his own gain."

Conway could see now that Contez had the startling blue eyes and regular features of Spanish ancestry. He guessed there must be some deeper story connected with Contez' riding with Blacky's outlaws, but he did not press for that now.

He helped Contez mount, and they reached higher ground.

THE ranch line shack was in a canyon, according to Contez, who said they would be able to hide out there for a few days until he could ride again.

They had followed an unmarked trail, winding among broken and violently colored rocks that had given Red Rock county its name. In two hours, Conway judged, they must have covered some five miles.

There had been no indication of pursuit. Conway could see that any posse, or Blacky Bole's riders would have had to guess right in picking any one of a hundred ways they might have taken.

All at once Conway noticed they had come out above a sloping bench where

the rocks disappeared and verdant grass crept up to the edge of the badlands. He could see wide meadows dotted with cows, and about half a mile away was the straight line of a road.

"This line shack belongs to a ranch, Contez?" questioned Conway.

"It's the Spence *rancho*," replied Contez, who was holding up, but growing weaker through loss of blood. "But the line shack to which we will go has not been used for a long time. It is there I have stayed at times, and I have it well stocked with food."

Conway's blood quickened. The Spence ranch?

"You know they's been plans made by Blacky Bole an' Banker Corley to rob Spence?" he asked.

"I know, *Senor* Conway," said Contez. "It is for this and other things I have meant to leave Blacky Bole. I was very wrong when I became one of his *hombres*. You see, I had my own *rancho* once, and it was burned out in a range war. I was bitter and revengeful. I did not know quite what I was doing in my madness."

Conway was reminded of his own recent madness, and he could understand. Somehow though, the memory of a rodeo girl who had chosen a wealthier man now seemed shadowy, something of years ago instead of but a brief month or so.

What further Contez might have revealed had to wait. Conway could see a looming heap of black rocks about a mile away, which Contez said marked the entrance to the line shack canyon.

From the broken badlands behind them and not far away a small band of four horsemen would burst out. Apparently they had not yet seen the fugitives, but Contez had keen eyes.

"They are Blacky's *hombres*," he announced. "Leave me, *Senor* Conway, and ride—ride hard for the Spence home ranch. It is down that trail road six or seven miles."

"We're making a stand here," said Conway grimly. "At least you will be safe for a little while in the rocks. If it fails, I'll hit out for the Spence place."

The faint yells of the four riders told they were seen as Conway got Contez fixed up in a fissure where he would be sheltered and difficult to find. He took Contez' extra gun with the others.

Suddenly the oncoming riders must have been puzzled. For they could see three riderless horses where there had been two men. The horses were breaking away, circling around the lower hillside.

Apparently the four outlaws were made confident. They came down the graded bench, spurring straight toward the running animals. They did not see Conway holding Indian fashion, riding below the saddle of one of the horses.

The four riders strung out, yelling as they came, when Conway let go his hold, landed with a rolling limpness, then was hunkered behind a rock he had picked out before he started. Intent upon the three horses with their laden saddlebags the outlaws cut across, lining themselves within thirty yards of Conway's rock

Conway's first shot rolled the leader from his saddle. The second outlaw was hit hard, but clung to his saddle, turning his horse as his two companions pulled up short and got their guns belatedly into action.

Lead scored Conway's rock now and kept him down. A glancing bullet cut one cheek. He came up suddenly, a gun in each hand. With the same one-two triggering that had picked cigars from the teeth of heroic gents in a rodeo arena. Conway emptied the last two saddles.

CONWAY stood up, watching the outlaws' horses breaking away. Reins strung together, his own three horses had slowed. Aat that moment Conway was standing fully exposed. His ride had brought him nearly down to the Spence ranch road, but he was not looking that way.

"Put up your hands, or I'll sure enough let you have it!"

The voice was vibrant with anger, but still was like low music. Conway turned slowly. Scarcely forty feet away in the trail, slightly below him, was the dark, pretty girl he had seen in Brazos.

"Margie Spence?"

She was mounted on a roan gelding.

What was more interesting at this moment was the small Winchester repeater pointed at Conway. He had no doubt whatever that the girl would let him have it.

Conway could have ducked and shot the rifle from the girl's hands. But he raised his hands slowly, letting his two guns drop.

The girl seemed a bit puzzled then at what to do, but she urged her horse toward him. Suddenly she stopped, staring.

"You? So you're one of them! Makin' out you're a bum to help rob Ralph Cor-

ley's bank! Walk out an' catch up them horses!"

Conway had to think of Contez lying up there in the rocks.

He managed some other fast thinking all within ten seconds. Of how Corley had tricked everybody in Brazos. Of how Corley was framing with Blacky Bole to rob the Spence ranch safe, using his friendship with this girl to make the crime easier.

Or, and this was worse, would Corley change his plan and try for the Spence ranch by hitching up with the deluded girl?

Under no circumstances did Conway intend to be taken in as the girl's prisoner and leave Cortez afoot, and an easy victim to others of Blacky's men or a posse from town. Moreover, Conway knew he would have no chance to explain his own position.

But now his quick mind told him there was a way to trap this crooked Banker Corley. And it was upon this thought that he acted, even as Margie Spence exclaimed, "Walk out, I say, or I'll shoot you down! Like you killed those men of the posse!"

She had not known they were Blacky Bole's men.

Conway took one stride, his hands still in the air. But he appeared to stumble with his next step. His quick fall flattened him to the ground. One hand moved too fast to be followed as he snatched his third gun, taken from Contez, from inside his shirt.

Margie Spence cried out and the rifle exploded. But it was a miss, as Conway was sure it would be. Conway's shot clipped one of the roan's ears.

The roan snorted with pain, jumped sideways, and compelled the girl to catch at the saddle horn, her rifle swinging wildly. Conway was lying flat on the ground when the horse shied, but when the girl had the roan under control, Conway was yards away among the rocks.

Conway kept moving, but halted long enough to fix the position of one of the outlaw's horses still milling about. He reached the horse with a quick run that cornered it near a rocky shelf.

Margie Spence was both game and mad. She fired the rifle again twice, but Conway was low in the saddle and riding as if he had no intention of stopping this side of Blacky Bole's outlaw hideout, wherever that might be. He deliberately kept in view of the girl until he was at such a distance there seemed no likelihood of his return.

Conway fell to the ground. His hand moved too fast to be followed as he snatched his third gun.

When he pulled up, he was in a thin growth of stunted pine. He still had a good view of the girl, now half a mile away.

"There goes my last chance o' squarin' myself with Brazos," muttered Conway grimly. "That is, unless I can somehow meet up with Margie Spence again as a different lookin' ranny."

It was evident that the gritty girl imagined she had had the luck to perform a great service for Banker Corley. She had called him Ralph.

For Conway watched her round up the three weary beasts that had been brought this far by Contez and himself. And Margie Spence proved she was smart, too.

While Conway watched, she transferred four of the gold sacks to her own saddle pockets. Then she slung the other two sacks together with rope and laid this across her own saddle.

After which, she pulled the cinches on the saddles and stripped the bridles from the three tired and hungry animals.

A few minutes later, Conway was beside Contez. The blue eyes of the Mexican were puzzled, but warm with approval.

"The Spence girl was riding out from Brazos," Conway told Contez. "She has all of the gold, and she turned back. Mister, Banker Corley is gonna be one surprised *hombre*, an' he ain't gonna like it any too well."

Contez studied him thoughtfully.

"So, *Senor* Conway, you think only of having the gold go back to Corley?"

"I have other ideas," replied Conway. "I've never known a time when I needed a shave and other clothes as much as now."

CHAPTER V

Human Outlaw Bait

"YOU'RE a good-looking jigger, *Senor* Conway. Brazos would not now suspect you were, as you called yourself, a drunken bum. It is good that we are of about one size."

Contez, his broken arm splinted, looked upon Tom Conway with approval in his thoughtful blue eyes. Conway was a different figure in the nearly new buckskins that Contez had produced in the line shack.

He rubbed a hand over his smoothly shaved face, where only the slight scratch from a bullet remained to mark what he had been but half an hour before. He was sure that none in Brazos would ever identify him with the mooching tramp who had been thrown out of the Red Ace saloon.

"But you, Contez?" The rodeo rider scowled. "One of Blacky Bole's *hombres* got away from me before the girl took the gold. As soon as he meets up with the other outlaws, they will take up the trail almost directly here."

Contez nodded and smiled gravely.

"You are right, *Senor Conway*. But they have had a sample of your miraculous shooting. They will wait until night to try following us to this cabin, *Senor*. I have one big idea."

Thereafter Contez talked rapidly for a few minutes.

"It might work," admitted Conway. "But if it fails, Contez, the wolves will tear you to pieces. I can't be sure this Sheriff Sellers has the savvy to understand, or that he will take the word of a strange pilgrim."

"It is worth the chance, *Senor* Conway." And Contez spread his hands. "It is the least I can do. If Sheriff Sellers has returned to Brazos, you must make sure that no one knows you have made contact with him. That means you must wait for the night, and when Blacky Bole's *hombres* close in on the cabin, the surprise may be all for them, if the sheriff is smart."

"But you, Contez? You are hurt. You can't put up a fight."

"If I could think like the fox, I would not fight," smiled Contez. "I have not such brains, but I will use such as I have."

When Conway was mounted, having rested for awhile and fortified himself with food and drink, he was an erect, clean-cut figure with piercing gray eyes in a lean, shaved face.

"*Adios, Senor* Contez!" and he waved a hand.

"There is a man," added Conway under his breath.

"*Adios, Senor* Conway, and luck," said Contez.

"There goes a man," added Contez under his breath.

BRAZOS echoed to celebrating guns during the afternoon. Conway, snatching more rest as he waited, concealed in the mesquite-covered bench above the town, could read the shouting voices.

"I'd like to savvy Banker Corley's thinking right now," mused Conway. "Margie Spence has given him the gold. Corley could do no less than make known its return. But tonight he is supposed to ride to Blacky Bole's hideout for a split on that same gold."

Conway could well understand that Margie Spence was receiving the town's wild acclaim.

"An' like as not Corley's depositors will be drawing out much of their money," considered Conway. "It's possible that Corley will be forced into making another play. It'd be a ripe moment to put himself across with the girl. He'll maybe plan it to marry the girl an' cut in on the Spence money and ranch."

Conway considered another angle. Corley would be yellow-spined. He would be in cringing fear of what Blacky Bole might do. The girl would tell him how she had come by that bank loot. She would relate how she had come upon the drunken bum of the night before.

"An' she'll like as not discover the *hombres* I had to gun out weren't of any town posse," mused Conway. "The next thought will be that I was one of Blacky Bole's crowd, an' that I was makin' a try to get away with the gold."

Conway had to map out his campaign with care. A slip might mean failure, and he knew he would not last long if Corley managed to turn the town against him.

It was shortly after dark when Conway reached the sheriff's office in the jail. He approached it from the rear, having staked out his horse in a gully outside the town.

Sheriff Sellers was a grim-mouthed, aging man, whose years of enforcing the law in the tough town had made his keen eyes hard and skeptical. Yet he was a fair man, and he listened as Conway talked.

Conway left the jail office by the rear door, as he had entered.

PERHAPS half an hour later, Conway rode into the single street of Brazos. Again the life of the town centered around the Red Ace saloon. But bright kerosene lamps were burning in the bank.

Conway made his first test at the saloon. He dismounted and tied his horse at the hitch rack, slapped the dust off his buckskins, and pushed through the batwing doors.

Many eyes turned toward him with mild interest, but he ignored the scrutiny. Pete, the half Mext bartender, pushed a bottle across when Conway laid a gold-piece on the bar.

There was no hint of recognition. This stranger with the cool gray eyes could never have been connected with the ragged saddle bum who had lost his horse.

"Reckon yore banker would know of any loose land that could be bought up?" remarked Conway.

The bartender's eyes flickered, but he nodded.

"Yah, he's the *hombre* to see," he replied. "Thinkin' o' locatin' hereabouts, huh?"

"That's the idea," said Conway. "Got dried out on the Panhandle, an' hear they's plenty o' water down this way."

"Good, an' have another drink," said the bartender. "Corley's your man. Had a bank raid last night from some owl-hooters. But they split up amongst theirselves, an' a gal that Corley's been sparkin' turned into a shootin' hellion. Damn' if she didn't git back all the gold the owl-hooters took."

"So?" drawled Conway.

"Yah, an' if yur are for seein' Corley right away, you'll git a look at the gal.

She'll be up at the bank. You'd best go in easy, mister."

Conway downed a drink, disregarding the searching eyes that studied him.

"I'll go in easy," he grinned. "Like to meet up with a gal like that."

The bartender shook his head.

"Do yuh no good," he said. "She's staked out. Hope yuh have luck findin' some graze. It's a good county."

Conway had accounted for a visit to the bank. He desired no suspicion on the part of any citizen when he made his call. But his spine tingled as he learned that Margie Spence was at the bank with Corley.

As Conway mounted and rode back up the bank, he saw a group of hard-faced riders coming down the street. He pulled aside. The leader wore a badge, and Conway knew he was one of the sheriff's deputies. The posse moved in silence, taking the trail down the creek.

Sheriff Sellers was not with the posse. Conway grinned. But his lean face became grave as the last of the posse passed him.

"Here's luck, Contez," he said solemnly.

BANKER CORLEY looked up with a quick scowl as Conway entered. He had the appearance of a man who knew he was sitting on dynamite, with a short fuse lighted.

Margie Spence turned her shapely figure part way in the chair across the desk from Corley. Her dark eyes took in Conway, surveying him from boots to 'brero, and lingering a long ten seconds upon the single gun swinging low on his thigh.

Conway gave her a straight look as Corley spoke up.

"Yes," said the banker shortly. "If you're on business, it's after hours. I'm just closin'."

Conway smiled, but he was watching the girl. He had a guilty notion that she was frowning as she gave his face a brief once-over. It seemed to him her eyes lingered upon the bullet scratch along his cheek, but there was no evidence that she had coupled him with the bearded renegade killer she had tried to kill.

"A-feared my business won't wait," drawled Conway, appearing not to notice Corley's shifting eyes and the fear that he knew was causing the banker to clench his hands tightly.

Margie Spence started to rise.

"I'll be going along over to the hotel, Ralph," she said, and in the quick, appraising look she gave him for the second time, Conway was sure that the girl was trying to make up her mind about him.

"Ney' mind, Margie," said Corley, and his tone was sharper. "Whoever you are, mister, I'm not talkin' business at this hour."

"Too bad, sir," said Conway quietly. "I'm wantin' to know tonight about some ranch land, say about two thousan' acres. Be quite a deal, but maybe they's others—"

Cupidity almost rode down the suspicion in Corley's eyes. He unclenched his hands, rubbing them.

"Why'n't say that in the first place, Mister—?"

"Bascom," said Conway slowly, deliberately. "Rader Bascom. Maybe so you'd heard of me."

Conway could almost see the sweat pop out on Corley's forehead, as the banker let one hand drop below the level of the desk. But Conway's fingers strayed carelessly to the butt of his low-slung gun and Corley brought his hand back into view.

Conway knew the names must have hit Corley hard, told him what the girl could not guess. That his cool visitor had come from Blacky Bole.

"Yeah—yeah—Margie, I guess I'll have to see what I can find for—Mr. Bascom," stammered Corley. "I'll see you at the hotel in a few minutes."

Conway remained alert, aware that the girl was leaving with puzzled reluctance. He knew she was upon the verge of remembering something, possibly that bullet gouge upon his cheek.

Then she said, "Sure, Ralph. I'll be waiting."

Corley's furtive eyes watched the girl go out of the door and his look was that

of a man who sees his last hope walking away.

Conway smiled then, spoke softly.

"Yuh got, it, Corley. I just hitched up with Blacky Bole, an' he sent me 'cause I'd be a stranger to Brazos. Blacky is kind o' mad, Corley. Yeah, he's damn' mad."

Corley's tongue licked at his thin, dry lips.

"But I didn't—I couldn't help what happened—I'll make it up, an' I'll explain—"

"Blacky sent word he ain't waitin', Corley," said Conway relentlessly. "Figures yuh had a jasper planted to grab that gold, an' he wants it back pronto."

Corley was sweating profusely now.

"Good grief!" he groaned. "Can't Blacky see I ain't got ary way to take that gold now. It bein' here puts me in bad enough, and—"

"Blacky thought of all that," cut in Conway. "I was told to give yuh a way out, one way, an' if yuh don't take it, Blacky's raidin' Brazos before morning. He's coming for you, Corley."

"No—no—he can't do that—if he waits—"

Blacky said there was a way, Corley. He's wantin' the combination of that Spence safe, an' now. He's sure yuh got it, an' if yuh ain't, they'll be no more dallyin'."

"But I ain't—"

"Blacky said that when the gal fetched you that gold, you'd be able to get it, Corley. You bein' the tophand with her."

Conway could read the truth in Corley's eyes. The banker already had that combination. No doubt he had been figuring on trying to count Blacky Bole out and take over the ranch along with Margie Spence.

"It's a bluff, an' Blacky don't dare—"

"Blacky won't like yuh talkin' thataway," snapped Conway. "He's waitin' now within gunshot of the town. Waitin' to hear what yuh have to say. He said for you to give me that combination an' if it's right he'll pass up this business of the gold. Well?"

"I can't—"

Conway turned his back deliberately.

"If that's the way yuh want it, Corley—"

"No—wait! Yeah, I got it—here on this paper—"

Conway's gun whipped out, was held steadily. But Corley was bringing out a slip of paper with figures on it. Conway reached over, took the paper.

"You're to stay around until this is proved up," he said.

CHAPTER VI

Strange Gunsmoke

CONWAY stepped from the door of the bank, swaggering. He saw that Banker Corley remained crouched behind his desk. Corley was a frightened man and Conway wondered what the banker's next move might be?

Conway was untying his horse when Sheriff Sellers stepped into view.

"Hold up a minute there, fella!" hailed the sheriff.

In response, Conway jerked up his gun and fired pointblank. His lead plucked at the sheriff's shirt sleeve.

But Sheriff Sellers was no slouch with an iron. The lawman's gun blasted from the level of his hip. Conway's iron flew from his fingers, slamming onto the plank walk.

"The next'n will split your gullet!" rapped out the sheriff. "Git up yore paws!"

Conway was nursing his gun arm when the sheriff stalked over to him. He had an eye cocked on the door of the bank and he saw the figure of Corley in the doorway.

The banker stood as if paralyzed as Sheriff Sellers clamped a hard hand upon Conway's collar.

"Had an idea yuh wasn't bein' watched, huh!" rasped the sheriff. "Yore mistake, mister, goin' for yore gun! Now walk!"

Five minutes later Conway looked out through the bars of one of the jail's two cells. He was listening to the voices arguing in the sheriff's office.

"I tell yuh I think he's one of the

Blacky Bole crowd!" was Sheriff Sellers' harsh pronouncement.

"I don't think so," Banker Corley was speaking in a strained tone. "He's a stranger, but he was wantin' to know about buyin' some ranch land. I'm afraid you made a mistake, Sellers."

"Then why'd he go for his gun, Corley? If I hadn't drilled his shootin' arm, he'd have got me. He fanned me with his first bullet."

Banker Corley was persistent. Conway could well guess what was in Corley's mind. With Blacky Bole's messenger in jail, there was no way the threatened raid by Blacky could be prevented.

"Lemme talk to him a minute, sheriff," and Corley was using his normal dictating tone. "Maybe there's an explanation. I'm thinking he didn't know you was the law, an' acted hastily."

"A'right," growled the sheriff. "Go on in an' talk to him. But don't get within his reach."

The door to the sheriff's office was carefully closed by Corley, as he walked in. The banker came and stood beside the bars. Conway had his right arm in a bandana sling.

"Yuh double-crossin' whelp!" snarled Conway. "Puttin' the sheriff on me! You'll damn' well wish yuh hadn't when Blacky hears o' this!"

"Look—I hadn't anything to do with it," said Corley, keeping his voice low. "I'll get you out. Give me a hour or so. I'll make the sheriff see you're all right. He owes me—"

The jail office door opened then. Sheriff Sellers appeared. Margie Spence was beside him, her dark eyes widening as they took in Corley and the man behind the bars.

"Ralph! I knew it! I got to thinking, an' I know I'm right!" Margie Spence was hurrying to Corley's side. "This is the killer I saw shoot down three men today, an' who tried to shoot me when I stopped him!"

"But Margie—he couldn't be—you're mistaken—"

Corley was mopping at his damp brow. His hand shook.

Sheriff Sellers stood behind them, his broad face without much expression, waiting.

Conway rubbed his left hand over his bandaged gun arm and muttered an oath.

"Damn yuh, Corley!" he blurted out then. "Yuh git me out'n here! Yuh tricked me, an' had the sheriff shoot me up! Wait'll Blacky—"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" exclaimed Corley. "Come on, Margie. I was fooled, I admit it—"

Conway's voice dropped to malicious softness.

"He wasn't fooled none whatever, miss," he said. "He was in with Blacky Bole on that robbery last night. Maybe he was tryin' to cover up stealin' from the bank—"

"That's too ridiculous to make sense!" shouted Corley. "The man is an insane killer! He tried to gun down Sellers!"

"Yuh believe him, Miss Margie?" asked Conway quietly.

"Come on, Ralph," said the girl. "Of course I believe you."

"I was afraid of that," said Conway quickly. "He was in on stealin' that gold though. And he's scared sick, thinkin' Blacky Bole is comin' to get him. He was to see Blacky tonight an' get his split, an'—"

"Let's go, Ralph!" The girl was furiously angry. There was no doubt but that she was for Corley all the way.

"Wait, Miss Margie," said Conway. "Ask Corley why he gave me the combination to your father's safe? Why, if it wasn't for Blacky Bole, and to keep Blacky Bole—"

THE girl turned, held by that, her dark eyes beginning to show doubt.

"Margie! He's lying to try and save himself," sputtered Corley.

"Miss Margie," said Conway evenly. "How about twenty-left, eighteen-right, seven-left, back to zero—?"

The girl gasped, her curved red lips straightening to a line of white and her eyes turning to Corley. But Corley was quick. His hand came up and a hideout derringer exploded.

But Conway's supposedly wounded hand had been faster. Smoke shot out

from the bandage on his arm. Corley cursed, half turned, and caught at the bars to keep his feet.

Conway's lead from the gun concealed in the bandanna sling had ripped a furrow from Corley's wrist to his elbow. Sheriff Sellers put out a hand that kept Corley from going down.

"Ralph! Nobody but you knew that combination."

Margie Spence looked at the banker with hurt, disillusioned eyes. Sheriff Sellers was unlocking the cell door.

"Too bad, Corley," said the lawman. "Unlucky for you that yuh didn't know that Blacky Bole is right now miles from here. An' he's in a trap he won't bust out of this time. Margie, yuh had it right. This shootin' jigger here is the same one that let yuh bring back the bank loot."

Conway was removing the bandanna from his arm. No wound was revealed. The sheriff's gun had been loaded with blanks when they had clashed in the street.

BANKER CORLEY was in the cell with his smashed arm in a real sling. When the pose rode in, the blue-eyed Mexican Contez came into the jail office.

"I'm givin' myself up, sheriff," said Contez. "You have *Señor* Conway to thank for the end of the Blacky Bole outlaws."

"Yeah?" drawled Sheriff Sellers. "I don't seem to recollect they bein' any reward notices for a fella of yore description—say the name is Contez—never heard o' it."

Margie Spence looked from Contez to Conway. Conway's eyes smiled at her. But he spoke to Contez.

"I rode into Brazos lookin' for a piece o' land to take up," said Conway. "I'll be needin' a pardner that knows cattle raisin' down here on the border."

Margie Spence turned slowly, walking toward the door.

"Just a minute, Miss Margie," said Conway. "Yore dad will have to be changin' the combination of his safe, seein' I'm something of a stranger hereabouts."

"Yes?" said Margie Spence softly, pausing and turning toward him. "I suppose he will."

"Unless," added Conway, "it's a secret that might be kind o' kept in the family. Not wantin' you should think I'm makin' up my mind too fast, an' maybe rushin' my luck."

Margie was silent for a long minute of appraisal, then she smiled a little.

"My dad always said a smart man wins because he plays his luck when it's running his way," she said quietly. "About that combination to the safe? I trusted Ralph Corley up to the minute he asked me for that. So dad won't have to change it. I gave him the wrong figures."

Conway knew then he was going to rush his luck until he made sure he had *the smartest wife in Red Rock county.*

War Bonds Are Your Guarantee of Future Freedom!

RED GOLD FOR KILLERS

"THIS NIGHT I'm heeled to howl high! Three long, dry years I've been conservin' a thirst! Step up, all you gents, an' liquidate the alkali out'n yore dry gullets!"

A lightning bolt striking from the glittering prisms of the kerosene chandelier in the High Stakes Saloon could not have rendered its nondescript customers, from cowpokes to graying prospectors, more speechless.

"Howlin' hyenas!" An amazed miner's yelp broke the spell. "If it ain't Scrimpy! Never thought I'd live to see the day!"

Sinners all, when it came to free liquor, one and all in the crowded High Stakes rushed the long bar six deep. It was true. A lanky, long-haired pilgrim wagged an untrimmed set of whiskers as he poured a handful of heavy, reddish dust from a poke.

"They's more where that come from!"

By PAUL HANNA

There was a particular method in the apparent madness of the desert rat named Scrimpy, when he announced his rich gold strike in front of all those killers. But the payoff amazed 'em all!

The surprise of death was in the killer's eyes, as Scrimpy dropped flat, shooting again.

proclaimed Scrimpy, whose moniker had been earned by three long years of miserly hoarding of the scanty gold he was supposed to have washed from an unnamed and unmapped creek canyon. "Slogged away at that danged crick spring an' summer an' fall for nothin' but beans. An' then, by hokey, all of a sudden I dug into a pocket, an' thar she was—lookit!"

Scrimpy's unprecedented swigging of the High Stakes' liquid lightning appeared to have drowned all caution. None but a locoed mind would have so recklessly inspired this boast of what it seemed might be a red-rich strike.

"Hain't she be-yut-ee-ful?" questioned Scrimpy, and with drunken solemnity he produced a good-sized specimen of quartz rock from his shirt, letting it thud upon the bar. "Nighest thing to a mother lode that's ever been seen in Quesado! An' they ain't ary human on two hind-legs but me kin ever find it!"

Scrimpy licked his tongue along dry lips and downed another drink.

"No sirree! Been pannin' that forsaken Black Butte Canyon ever since I hit Quesado, an' ain't never had no reason to drive a location stake! They bein' tons o' high-grade where that'n come from, mebbe so now I'll stake 'er out an' file claim papers when I git time to shag over to the county seat!"

Many tongues licked suddenly at many other dry lips. Socres of pairs of avaricious eyes became red-rimmed and speculative, and a dozen other voices yelled out the boon of more free drinks.

Calloused hands passed the heavy quarts along, as old-timers expertly weighed the rock and muttered. It was as good high-grade as Scrimpy claimed. So streaked with its gold content that it seemed almost soft to the touch.

AND this was the awakening greed which Scrimpy sought to arouse. In spite of his apparently maudlin boasting, Scrimpy's deep-set blue eyes searched the rows of faces along the bar without his seeming to do so.

For all his unkempt hair and his unshaven whiskers, Scrimpy was much younger than most of the rough-and-ready gents crowding around him. The whiskey warming his innards was far from confusing his keenness of observation and judgment.

Somewhere in Quesado, more than likely here and now in the High Stakes Saloon, was a ruthless killer. Or rather a boss of killers. A murderer with a rep that had struck terror throughout the rich panning creeks and a few gold-streaked canyons of the Mule Tail Mountains.

For half a dozen years there had been strange "accidents" to prospectors working rich claims. Cabins had been burned, with their occupants. Gold panners had been drowned in shallow creeks.

In a few cases the terror had struck with bullet and knife.

Three years before a kid prospector known as Bill Storm had been found buried in a rock slide where there would have been no slide without some boosting with carefully planted powder.

Shortly after the death of Bill Storm, and the disappearance of all the gold he must have panned in six months' work, Scrimpy had packed into Quesado. He was not known as Scrimpy at first.

He gave his monicker as plain John Jones then. He was long-haired then and lightly bearded. He was three years longer of hair now, and three years longer of straggling whiskers.

John Jones arrived with all his worldly goods diamond-hitched on a long-eared, moth-eaten burro he called Belshazzar. Belshazzar was still packing John Jones's worldly goods, only he was slightly more moth-eaten and stubborn.

During nearly three years of the open summer season for gold washing in the creeks, John Jones disappeared in the spring and returned in the fall. Only Belshazzar accompanied him, ond only Belshazzar shared the secret of whatever hidden creek John Jones had chosen for panning.

"Ain't much more'n a bone-wearin' livin' in the Mule Tails," was John Jones' complaint each time he came back to Quesado. "I reckon, though, me an' Belshazzar kin lead a peaceable life an' git along on it."

So each time he returned, John Jones bought himself just two whiskies, which he would nurse along for a whole evening at the High Stakes. After which he would hole up in a town shack, loafing some in the saloon, but never buying or accepting another drink.

Thus he became known as "Scrimpy," and he was put down as a mildly locoed, harmless pilgrim who like as not had been kicked in the head by a bronc when he was a younker.

Until today, and this night. Today Scrimpy had come plodding into town after a scant three weeks absence. He had come driving three laden burros besides old Belshazzar. He had pointed the beasts straight to Trump Murdock's bank, where it soon became known to everybody that Scrimpy had cached a remarkable take of dust for safekeeping.

And here was Scrimpy "likkering" up

and bragging his head off. He was boastful about his "strike." He had good reason, if the rock he showed was to be had in any quantity.

There were gun hands itching there in the High Stakes. That was known to Scrimpy. There were those there who would have sent him to boothill without an after wakeful moment of conscience.

And, Scrimpy knew well enough, there were those who would have scorched the soles of his feet, pulled out his fingernails, notched his ears, if they had been given the chance, to extract from him the secret of his "rich-strike" creek.

SCRIMPY could have named nearly all these gents with free gun hands and a freer conscience. He was well aware that he was inviting sudden death, but he was sure, moreover, that his death would be put off until he had been trailed back to his strike.

Outwardly careless of the sudden wealth he proclaimed, Scrimpy seemed poorly equipped to look after himself, either in ability or weapons. One old-fashioned, single-action Walker-Colt was hitched too high in a scuffed leather holster.

That was all the arms Scrimpy displayed. He appeared to be enjoying himself immensely.

"Set 'em up again!" he repeated so many times that nearly all the reddish dust of two pokes had gone over the bar.

The ready drinkers would never guess that Scrimpy was tonight throwing away part of what it had taken him three long years of steady back-breaking labor to produce. That is, the other dust and this he spent had been saved by the scrimping that had given him his name.

Neither would the greedy killers of the High Stakes suspect that the rich high-grade rock he was showing had come a few years before from one of the biggest paying mines of a neighboring State.

His available dust nearly gone, and his voice thickened to a husky whisper, Scrimpy was slumped in a chair, his whiskered face sunk on his breast. Yet he was acutely observant of three little groups that had drawn together to confer over this situation.

That these three groups were made up of Quesado's most ruthless killers Scrimpy was fully aware. But he still saw that none of these hard cases had either a plan or a boss who would direct their best move.

"They're too watchful of each other, too greedy to get together," thought Scrimpy. "The bait hasn't been taken where I want it to be."

Trump Murdock, the banker, came in as Scrimpy watched. He was a big and hearty man who had openly battled for law and order in Quesado. Knowing of Scrimpy's sudden fortune, and the amount of dust in his bank, Trump Murdock scowled with worry as he saw his latest depositor deep in the fumes of too much liquor.

The little groups, with lawless designs upon Scrimpy's secret strike, hurriedly found other business as Trump Murdock sized up their too obvious intentions. They dispersed as quickly as scared sheep, some to the bar, others clumping outside.

Murdock put a friendly hand upon Scrimpy's shoulder.

"Wake up, Scrimpy," he said. "Time you was rollin' in for the night. Reckon you'd best put up at the Highgrade House. It'll be—well, lonesome in that shack of yours."

Scrimpy grunted, rubbing grimy knuckles into his eyes.

"Nope," he muttered thickly. "Ain't so high-toned I'm wantin' to sleep 'tween itchy sheets. Gittin' me an early start 'fore daylight, an' have to git them burros packed."

Murdock shook his head, his eyes apprehensive.

"Don't be a fool, Scrimpy," he advised. "If what you say is true, you can't go shaggin' back into the Mule Tails alone. It'd be as much as your life is worth."

"Hoh!" grunted Scrimpy. "Jest let any skunk come pesterin', an' I'll trim off his buttons! Think I can't take keer o' myself?"

He fumbled clumsily with the old-fashioned Colt. He got it clear of leather before Trump Murdock could reach him.

The old gun blasted acidentally and without aim.

Prisms of the chandelier tinkled and fell. Red Gorman, the tough owner of the High Stakes, reached Scrimpy in two strides from the end of the bar and slapped the gun from his hand.

"If you was in your right mind, I'd make you pay double for that!" snapped Gorman. "If you've got friendly ideas, Murdock, take Scrimpy along out, soon as he signs to pay the damage."

"I'm goin'," growled Scrimpy. "I'll sign a paper, an' Murdock can pay yuh tomorrow."

Outside, Trump Murdock still had anxiety in his voice. No doubt he could see the shifting shadows decorating some of the corners along the false-fronted store buildings.

"You come along to the hotel, Scrimpy," said Murdock persuasively. "Marshal Long's out of town, an' anything might happen."

"Nope," said Scrimpy, stubbornly, and shook off Murdock's hand. "Packin' out, I am. Shaggin' 'fore daylight."

He left Murdock looking after him and shaking his head.

Scrimpy made his shack without being molested. He had set a zigzagging, unsteady course to do it. And he was chuckling grimly.

"They ain't any of 'em gettin' out o' sight of the others long enough to make a break here in town," mused Scrimpy. "An' even when they git together, an' the boss killer shapes it up, I ain't in ary danger this side o' the creek that gold come out of."

OLD BELSHAZZAR wagged his long ears as Scrimpy pulled a tight hitch on a new pack of supplies.

The tough saloonman reached Scrimpy in two strides, and slapped the gun from his hand.

"You wouldn't know it, you ol' coot," said Scrimpy. "But you an' me are goin' in for the last time. Wouldn't them gold-crazy rannies be su'prised to know they ain't a single, solitary washin' o' dust left in Afternoon Creek?"

Belshazzar peeled back his long lip and brayed raucously, as if he fully understood the joke implied.

"No, sirree, Belshazzar, they ain't nothin' in that canyon, not even a patch o' water greens." Scrimpy laughed softly. "But by this time, the boss killer that's responsible for Bill bein' found in that rock slide is roddin' his best trailers together, an' waitin' for me to start."

Scrimpy had another thought then, one that had come to him before.

"It bein' one o' the richest strikes Quesado ever seen, like as not the boss won't be takin' more'n one or two gunnies to share in locatin' claims on the creek," he told Belshazzar. "He'll be knowin' there'll be a rush, but he'll want to make sure he's on the inside ahead of the others.

"Reckon that part about me never havin' to drive stakes for location, an'

not havin' registered the claim, will do the business."

While there was humor in Scrimpy over his hoax that he had been three years contriving, there was also a set grimness across the broad, firm mouth under his whiskers.

"We'll give 'em plenty o' time to find out they've been decoyed to a dry wash on a worked-out creek," muttered Scrimpy. "An' then, the rannies that's trusted by the boss are goin' to know all the reasons why they are stuck for their few remainin' days, buried in Afternoon Canyon. Yup, Belshazzar, we'll be lettin' 'em know."

Scrimpy gave every evidence of a pilgrim with a bad taste in his mouth and wobbly pins as he clumped alongside Belshazzar and turned straight across the barrens west of town, heading toward the thirty-mile stretch of Furnace Flats. None but weathered and toughened prospectors ever took that straight trail toward the Mule Tail range and the Black Butte which concealed the hitherto unmapped canyon Scrimpy had named Afternoon Creek Canyon.

In the early morning, before the sun started scorching the red sandstone and alkali of Furnace Flats, Scrimpy could detect the faint but unmistakable sounds of those who had elected to follow him. But as he entered the baking desert at daylight, he figured his trailers would drop back and depend upon his plain sign.

BEING much more fortified with water in canvas bags than would be suspected, Scrimpy waited until the sun radiated breath-taking heat from the crouching dunes before he struck off at an odd angle over a mile strip of flinty rock on which no sign would be left.

"Have to make 'em believe I'm doin' my best to throw 'em off," he confided to old Belshazzar. "They'll be burnin' with thirst 'fore we reach the first waterhole. An' it'll have to look like an accident that they can pick up our sign again."

Only once did the gold-hungry hard cases following approach near enough for their white cloud of dust to be seen. Then Scrimpy doubled a mile on his own trail, and took an abrupt angle northward.

He was sure that the best desert rats among the killers could not find his sign now. Then it was that he halted old Belshazzar and loosened the pack hitch. After he made it appear as if the ropes had come undone and Belshazzar had bolted, with the pack tie stringing, Scrimpy emptied a waterbag in a rock hollow.

"Drink your belly full, Belshazzar," he ordered. "You an' me has reached the partin' of the ways. You're goin' back to good graze. You'll take it the shortest way, and there's dust where you'll leave a new sign for them to pick up."

He slapped the old burro's rump and watched Belshazzar go braying back toward Quesado, along the edge of Furnace Flats.

When Scrimpy took up his march with the remaining three burros, he knew his plain sign would be left all the way for those who were coming with greed and murder in their hearts.

"But it's two days from here for me, knowin' the trail, an' two an' a half days for them, havin' to go easy not to lose sign," said Scrimpy with confidence.

The going cooled as the blue ridges of the Mule Tail Mountains came nearer. Waterholes were far apart, but frequent enough. Scrimpy doubted that any other human had ever taken this trail toward the looming loneness of high Black Butte.

Because of his own grieved wandering three years before, he had come upon the canyon of Afternoon Creek, a stream that carried water only during the hours when top snow was melting under an afternoon sun high on Black Butte.

SCRIMPY was nearing the high rim of Black Butte near the end of the second day after Furnace Flats. He could see the narrow gap of volcanic rock which formed the only entrance to Afternoon Creek and the canyon of barren rocks inside sheer, unscalable walls.

"I'll be in time to make sure the powder kept dry and the long fuse hasn't been bothered by prowling varmints," said

Scrimpy, as he was in the welcome shade of the mile-high rim. "Now if—"

Then, his senses keened to sound, Scrimpy climbed a rocky ridge and sighted back along his trail. He had heard the faint, floating echoes of steel shoes clinking on stone.

He swore to himself now as he saw the moving specks far back. The gold-greedy killers were hours ahead of where they should have been. Within the hour, they would reach the spot where Scrimpy now stood.

"An' that means I'll have to work fast," muttered Scrimpy. "It ain't possible to climb to the powder, then get back down an' up the creek as I'd intended."

For Scrimpy had timed his future movements, as he had hoped, to give him a chance to see and know the boss murderer, and to make himself known. He judged he might make it that way if he hurried.

He was driving the three burros into the gap, pushing them along. There was a sudden, hollow booming sound from inside the canyon.

Scrimpy instinctively halted and ducked, his eyes going upward. Had something happened to set off the powder trap he had arranged? He expected to see the wall of loose rock above him come bulging outward, then fall into the gap.

To his surprise, the wall remained intact. Yet he knew that hollow booming had been a blast. It was inside the canyon. In the canyon where he had worked out every bar and hole of the vagrant Afternoon Creek.

"Now what the Sam Hill?" he grumbled. "Plague take it! You'd think that yarn I built around that high-grade quartz I brought from Colorado had somethin' to it. What in thunder—?"

There was another explosion. But this was a crackling shot. A rifle bullet, slanting downward, skimmed viciously along the wall, too close to Scrimpy to be comforting.

Scrimpy dropped, yelling at the burros to drive them out of range. He was looking up toward a narrow shelf than ran along the gap some fifty yards above the trail. Back of that shelf he had planted his own powder, giving it a long fuse that could be lighted from the creek level inside the canyon.

The rifle cracked again. This time the bullet spanged into the wall a few feet from Scrimpy's face. He looked up and the sun, shining into the gap, showed the bound, bright hair and the white face of a girl.

Scrimpy didn't quite believe it. He thought his hangover from the night in Quesado was still with him. Then a musical voice dispelled any idea of an illusion.

"Turn around and go back, stranger, or I won't miss the next time! This is a private claim, an' nobody's welcome here!"

Although his audible oaths were uttered for only his own ears, Scrimpy was profanely conscious that his position was untenable. The bright-haired lady with the rifle had him over her sights any way he might move.

Nevertheless, Scrimpy thought they could palaver over this unexpected situation.

"Whadda yuh think you're tryin' to do?" he called out. "This canyon an' all that's in it are my claim by right of discovery an' workin' it! Besides, you're liken to git yourself blowed galley west if you don't git off'n that shelf!"

The miss with the promiscuous rifle was unimpressed.

"Turn about an' shag out 'fore I shoot to kill!" was the girl's echoing reply. "Did you see that posted stake beyond the gap? If not, you have a look-see!"

SCRIMPY scrooched cautiously along the wall, abandoning his three burros and moving to the outer edge of the gap. He read with mixed feelings a crudely lettered sign on a flat board, staked on a mound of rocks.

ROWEL RUFFER CLAIM

AL AN SUNDREE NOTEEFIDE THIS CANYON IS CLOSED TO TRESPASEERS. AL RITES HEARBY ARE STAKED

ROWEL RUFFER & SAL RUFFER.

Scrimpy removed his old hat, scratching his thickly thatched head.

"If that ain't the beatin'est steal," he grunted.

There was a flurry of dust from a running horse. Scrimpy turned, hand going to his old gun. But his hand dropped when he saw a lone rider arriving at a fast clip.

Big Trump Murdock, his broad face all a worried scowl, slid from the saddle.

Trump Murdock cast an anxious look toward nearby humps of broken rocks. He was breathing deep and hard, and he had two guns cross-belted around his middle.

"Scrimpy, you danged fool!" he sang out. "You've been trailed right to here, an' they's half a dozen of Quesado's toughest killers ridin' down upon you! That's what comes of you not stakin' out your claim or filin' it accordin' to law!"

Murdock was leading his nag behind a rocky shelter, as if he had come to side Scrimpy in any ruckus that might break. Scrimpy smiled grimly.

"Knowed they was comin', Murdock." He nodded. "Figured on gittin' inside to stand 'em off!"

Murdock took a long breath of relief.

"Then let's mosey along," he suggested. "Tell you what, Scrimpy. You need help, an' I'll throw in with you. Whassay we slap up claim stakes an' I'll see the gold strike is legally filed for you an' me?"

Trump Murdock had been friendly. Scrimpy, however, was quick to see how the banker stood to come out ahead by putting in with him Knowing the creek was worked out, he judged he might as well put Murdock wise to the whole deal.

He glanced up at the shelf above the canyon trail in the gap. The sun was still reflected from metal and from bright hair. Due to the walls, Scrimpy knew their voices were carrying distinctly to the girl with the careless rifle.

"Sounds good, Murdock, only—" he began.

A muffled, rolling blast came from the inner canyon. The explosion whirled Murdock about, brought a puzzled question to his eyes, and then an oath to his lips.

"What's this, Scrimpy?" His tone had changed to an angry edge.

And in those three harsh words Scrimpy had the answer he had been seeking for three long years. Trump Murdock was the boss of the gold-claim killers! His presence here alone was no more than one of his clever tricks, a move to handle Scrimpy, get the supposed rich claim staked, then probably dispose of Scrimpy by the accident method that had been in use for half a dozen years.

"Well?" demanded Murdock. "Who's in there blastin'?"

SCRIMPY'S mind was working fast. He glanced over at the claim-notice board which Murdock had not yet spotted.

"Reckon that's my pardner on the claim," he lied glibly. "Yup! Seein' yuh are int'rested in my well-bein', I was tellin' only so much as I wanted in Quesado. Y'see my name ain't John Jones, an' it ain't Scrimpy. I'm Rowel Ruffer, I am, an'—"

Murdock had followed Scrimpy's gaze and had read the crudely posted sign. All pretense faded from Murdock's face and his eyes narrowed.

"Smart, ain't you?" snarled Murdock, and his hand slid into the front of his shirt. "But seein' you an' whoever you've took as a pardner ain't filed, me an' the boys will take care o' that—"

Murdock's hand whipped out with a sneak derringer. But he was a mite slower than Scrimpy, whose hand had flipped up and out of his collar. He likewise showed a hide-out derringer, and the two deadly little weapons crossed each other, but Scrimpy's gun was first to explode.

However, Murdock's hard scowl changed to a hard grin as Scrimpy took a bone-breaking chunk of lead near the elbow of his gun arm. Scrimpy's bullet went wide and four Quesado gunnies sprang from different points of shelter, converging upon Scrimpy with drawn guns.

Scrimpy had been partly turned by the impact of the lead from behind. His derringer fell to the ground and Murdock laughed harshly, keeping his own weapon centered upon Scrimpy's midriff.

"You're slow to catch on, Scrimpy," rapped out Murdock. "We ain't aimin' to kill you if you're reasonable. I've brought papers along, an' all you have to do is make over all rights an' title to this claim to the Quesado Bank, which is me."

Scrimpy cocked an eye toward the shelf in the gap, but he could no longer see the girl with the rifle. He thought, sickly, that perhaps she had fled, probably to summon this Rowel Ruffer who might be her father or her man.

"Won't do you do good, Murdock, if I do sign," said Scrimpy steadily nursing his shattered arm. "Told you I have a pardner."

Murdock's mouth thinned to a deadly line.

"No use, boss," growled one of his men. "Might as well put him away, an' then go git that other fella we didn't know about."

"Yeah!" spat out Murdock and this time his hand came up with the derringer, with a look in his eyes that told of but one intent.

Scrimpy knew he did not have a ghost of a chance against the gunnies, but here was the boss killer the murderer who had ordered the killing of his younger brother, Bill Storm.

Murdock's weapon spat vicious flame, but it was not fast enough. No one had ever suspected Scrimpy of gun-slinging. Yet his other hand filled with the old Walker-Colt in a blurring movement, and the gun blasted a split second ahead of Murdock's derringer.

The surprise of death was in Murdock's eyes, caused by lead driven through his teeth and into his skull. Then Scrimpy dropped flat, twisting, and doubling one of the gunnies over his own punctured stomach with a second shot.

Three other killers were shocked into a three-second delay in shooting. But then lead scored the ground and batted into the lanky body of Scrimpy.

Scrimpy realized it was his own blood putting that salty taste into his mouth and choking him. The three surviving gunnies were wavering phantom figures that danced through a shifting haze over Scrimpy's eyes.

He tried to lift the old Colt, but it suddenly weighed down his hands and he had no strength to trigger or thumb the hammer. He still had a certain satisfaction of a completed chore, however.

"Got the boss man, Bill," he said thickly. "Knowed I'd bring him in the open and—"

He closed his eyes because their vision was lost anyway. If he had a conscious hope, it was that the next lead would be downright quick and final.

The sudden shooting he heard, however, brought no more numbing jolts. The cursing voices sounded like those of men afraid rather than triumphant over their skill.

His eyes opened and he could see faintly. Only one of Murdock's gunnies was on his feet and he was backtracking toward the nearest hump of rocks. He failed to reach the shelter, for there was a vicious gun sound and that last gunnie went sliding on his face.

Scrimpy lost all interest then in the miracle.

"TELL YUH, Sally, he looks right chipper since yuh cut his hair an' shaved his whiskers to fix his busted jaw," drawled a cheerful voice. "Danged funny what a diff'runce a mess o' hair makes in a man's looks. Looks like he'll make the grade after all."

Scrimpy could open but one eye, and he did. There was an oldster who had whiskers of his own and sharp blue eyes set in a mass of wrinkles.

"Yes, dad, I reckon he'll live." This voice was low and soft and feminine. "From the way he's been talkin' out of his mind, he has the rightful claim to what you chanced on when you found that powder set in the gap an' started experimentin' along the creek."

Scrimpy woke up then, painfully, and all over. His hand went to the smoothly shaved jaw on one side, and touched a tight bandage on the other side of his face.

He could see brown eyes that were widely spaced and filled with sudden concern as he tried to grin, but couldn't. It didn't seem nowise possible that a girl

with such a white, high-grade face and such quick sympathy in her voice could have been the one who finished off Trump Murdock's claim-jumping gun-slingers.

He guessed it was so when she said: "Lie quiet, Mr. Storm. You won't be able to move for some time. The doctor from Quesado says it will be most a month."

"Doctor? Mr. Storm—?" Scrimpy was talking from the unbandaged corner of his mouth.

"Yup, young fella," said the oldster. "Yuh had a tough pull, but the least we could do was stick by yuh after yuh prob'ly saved our skins from them claim jumpers. Speakin' o' that, Storm, as your papers say yuh are—reckon me an' Sal is likewise guilty o' jumpin' yore claim, an' we'll be turnin' it back to yuh as soon as yuh kin take over the same."

"My claim?" Scrimpy guessed they didn't understand. "You mean this Afternoon Crick? Mister, she's plumb worked out. Maybe you heard o' me braggin' of a strike in Quesado?"

"Worked out, huh?" The oldster bit a corner off a plug of tobacco and chewed on it. "Nope. Didn't hear nothin' of yuh braggin' in Quesado. I was prospectin' an' come onto a mess o' powder yuh had cached up on the side of the canyon gap. Got to monkeyin' ar' used it to bust open the wall what the crick comes out of."

SCRIMPY tried to lift his head, but his neck seemed to have too many kinks in it. The girl's cool hand was slipped behind his ears as she supported him.

"Dad's trying to tell you, Mr. Storm, that he came onto a vein of high-grade ore when he blasted," she said. "It's like as not what's been feedin washings into the creek holes, where the doctor said you'd been pannin' for three years. The vein's awful rich, and dad went to the county seat and filed on it in your name."

Scrimpy was trying to figure the passing of time.

"Sounds as if I've been sleepin' a couple o' days," he murmured. "Long enough to be hungry as a snowbound coyote."

"A couple of days?" The girl laughed then, merrily. "Mr. Storm, you've been unconscious for more than three weeks. Dad's been digging out some of the quartz, and he's had it assayed. It is what dad's always dreamed about, and you're lucky, 'cause it's all centered at the head of the creek so there won't be any use for others trying to stake out workings."

Scrimpy was silent as he pondered upon all this.

"What d'you mean I'm lucky?" he said slowly at last. "That powder was meant to trap a murderer, an' it done so, but not quite like I figured it. I ain't takin' what I'd given up, after bein' too blind to find it. So—look, it's your strike—"

Scrimpy wondered what he really looked like without all his hair and whiskers, as the girl was shaking her head.

"I mean, I'll be needin' help," said Scrimpy. "Nope, *that* ain't the way o' it. I mean your dad will be needin' help to work this find, an' soon as I git on my feet, maybe—"

"Yuh don't owe us nothin', Storm," interrupted the oldster. "As soon as yuh git on yore pins, I allow to be moseyin' along."

Scrimpy appeared to consider this.

"I reckon if the doc says it'll be a month 'fore I'm able to be around, that'll be long enough," he said, as if talking to himself. "Yeah, a month'll have to do it."

The girl's brown eyes were filled with suspicion.

"A month will be enough for what?" she said softly.

"To make yuh see we'll have to be hitched proper 'fore your dad shags off an' leaves you here alone with me," said Scrimp. "If one month won't do it, I'll be off my feet for two months. An' if—"

"Yeah," drawled the oldster, matching Scrimp's grin. "I kin see now why yuh worked and waited three years to git the man yuh wanted. I allow, Sal, you might as well give up now."

"I'll do no such a thing," declared the girl, "Somebody might ask me what I think, anyway? I'll not be stampeded . . . well . . . not for at least one month."

Isle of Happy Marriages

ALTHOUGH some of four hundred tiny islands of the San Blas group are located only a mile from the mainland of the Isthmus of Panama, a world hot-spot, there seems little likelihood that the bizarre customs of the San Blas Indians will be disrupted by war. Certainly, no sea invader in his right mind would brave the treacherous reefs that surround the *Archipelago de las Mulatas*, official name of the island group.

It appears that customs will continue as usual among those foremost isolationists, the San Blas Indians, particularly the marriage custom, which explorers and scientists, prior to the war, wrote about considerably.

They marry young in San Blas. Usually a girl is fourteen or less and, since maturity is attained early in tropical climates, it is usually less.

But dignity? It's paramount. Marriage seems to be a lot more sacred among these supposed "savages" than it is in lots of places. Reno wouldn't last long among the San Blas chiefs. Their marriages are made to stick, and preparation starts early toward that end.

In each inhabited village of the four hundred islands of sand and palm stands the "maiden's house," a rude native dwelling. When a girl reaches puberty she is brought here and, for four days, must lie around as the women of the village take turns pouring water on her. This moist treatment is popularly supposed to cleanse the maiden and harden her for the trials and tribulations of marriage. After this, her hair is cropped short, the official notice that she has reached womanhood.

Then the parents of the girl step in. If you think American society girls have glittering coming-out parties, you should visit a San Blas debutante shindig. There is no champagne, but guests are served *Chicha*, made of cane juice, corn, plantain, and water. When fermented, it packs an awful wallop, so the happy bridegroom can be forgiven should he start singing, "You Ferment for Me, I Ferment for You."

THE most surprising element in their marriage customs is the subjective role of the young man, who does not have the chance to propose. That is due to the three-day coming-out party. The guests are adorned in colorful attire and those musically inclined bring flutes. The women of the tribe present to the new member of their femme fraternity, clothes, rings, gadgets, and other sundries.

At the close of the festive party, the girl is permitted to tell her parents which boy she prefers to marry. The proud father thereupon goes to the boy's home with the glad tidings, thus sparing his daughter the ordeal of having to be coy, or of scheming in encouraging a young man into a proposal.

When at last the details are settled and the time of the marriage ceremony is agreed upon, the young lady is placed in a strong hammock. Her attendants swing her to and fro, while awaiting the arrival of the lucky man, who at this time is en route to the bride's house. He is carried bodily, an old San Blas custom, and on his arrival is dumped ceremoniously into the hammock with the girl.

According to custom, the bridegroom is expected to jump out of the hammock and run away only to be brought back again by his friends. This is done three times, then it is customary for him to stay in the hammock.

If, however, the young man vamooses more than the allotted three times, and does not allow himself to be caught, his act is regarded as jilting the young lady. She must return to the home nest and try again. However, this doesn't let the fugitive off too easily. He must marry some other maiden in the near future. There are no old maids or bachelors among the San Blas Indians.

Incidentally, among the San Blas, a daughter is considered infinitely more important than a son! When a daughter is born to a woman, she alone and unaided, must enter a sacred hut. It is the signal for great rejoicing. The father can then set up his own establishment and be independent of his own father-in-law!

DUDE GIRL'S

Salty Milt Saner sure didn't want any fortune-hunter marryin' his daughter and thereby harvestin' all the fruits of Milt's life work. So Milt plumb up and figured out a plan—and it turned out to have more surprises than a porcupine has quills, with results danged near as prickly!

★ ☆ ★

"YOU drive the whole two thousan' o' the market beef into the Slash. You won't need more'n the half dozen riders you can trust, 'cause you'll all be ridin' drag after the dogies hit the gap into the badlands—"

Old Milt Saner clicked his hard, yellowed teeth over this crazy speech like any man with anger churning his innards.

"An' when you turn back, you light the fuse I got planted in the powder under the diversion dam. She'll blow hell, west, and crooked, an' let Wildcat creek take its nacheral course tother side o' Porcupine ridge—"

DESPERADO

By LARRY DUNN

Judd Lake, ramrod of the Bar-Q, couldn't keep his long jaw from dropping. His mouth sagged open and he stared wordlessly at the Bar-Q owner, as one would look at any man who has gone plumb out of his mind. He glanced hastily at the windows of the orderly bunkhouse, hoping none of the riders had heard Milt Saner's locoed order.

"If she'd come back from that dang-spangled, prissy school with only half a brain in her head, or with a few wild, harum-scarum scrapes she'd got into, or maybe some high-flown, Eastern cuss words, it'd be bearable," rambled Milt Saner, pulling at the ends of his gray, drooping mustache. "To the contrariwise, she's got her nose pointed up; she wears perfumery day an' night; she rides around in skimpy duds that's a shame to the nation; an' she calls that short-skirted postage stamp she straddles a saddle —an English ridin' saddle—"

The dude's ankle hold sent old Milt into an acrobatic backward somersault.

Judd Lake had guessed the why of old

Milt's addle-brained order about herding the Fall gather of prime beef into the badlands, and his cracked notion about blowing up the dam that had made the Bar-Q the richest spread in Pecos Valley.

TO Judd Lake's way of looking at it, the object of old Milt's outburst was the neatest filly ever to ride the valley range. That hard-bitten Milt Saner would take slowly to Glory's four years' accumulation of Eastern learning and foreign ways was to be expected.

"Ain't you bein' a mite, jest a mite hotheaded, Milt?" questioned Judd with a placating grin, having rodded the Bar-Q for Saner from the time Glory was a yellow-headed tomboy who had tried to ride every calf she could catch. "I know you don't cotton to this dude, Charles Woodley-Wharton, but makin' a bluff at havin' trouble on the Bar-Q ain't ary way to change a gal's mind, an' how in time do you think we'll git all that beef rounded up in the badlands in time to make the market drive in two weeks? How's about that one, Milt?"

Judd Lake lowered his voice during the last of this unusually long speech. He thought he saw a shadow pass a bunkhouse window.

Old Milt glared at his stocky, rusty-headed foreman. His voice boomed even louder.

"I ain't mentioned nothin' bout roundin' up that beef again! You ain't doin' so neither! What's been rustled an' is gone, is gone! You'll do some sky-shootin' up in the Slash, an' then you'll come high-tailin' back to report that a—that the—the Black Ghost—yupp, Black Ghost's as good a name as any—that the Black Ghost has raided the holdin' meadow an' run off the last hide an' hair of our market drive!"

Judd Lake surveyed old Milt's gaunt, weathered figure and face with growing concern.

"Maybe so this August heat's been too much, Milt," he said sadly. "You ain't been sleepin' an' eatin' right, have you?"

"Thunderation, Judd! How the devil could any man eat or sleep with a dude what parts his name in the middle, honin' to grab off what I've been twenty-eight years buildin' up? Him befuddlin' a soft-headed gal 'cause he puts on a boiled shirt for supper, an' calls it dinner, an' rides around every day all slicked up in funny pants—"

"Hold up your loop, Milt," cautioned Judd Lake. "We know this Woodley-Wharton might be likin' to join up his shoe-string, blooded hoss ranch with the Bar-Q money, an' Glory's in a fair way to be some blinded to his real idea, but he's downright certain to see through you runnin' a ranny an' makin' out the Bar-Q goin' bust."

Old Milt groaned deeply. He clamped his hard teeth together.

"I ain't makin' out like the Bar-Q is goin' bust," he stated grimly. "The Bar-Q is goin' bust—flat—dodrotted, downright, all the way broke, an' sold out by Lafe Skinner for the mortgage note them beef cows would have paid off. The Sanders, meanin' me an' the daughter that's turned out a hifalutin', no-account, half-dressed, uppity baggage, is startin' all over again, from scratch.

"An' you watch this slick, double-monickered dude drop Glory so fast it'll maybe give her a spoonful of sense."

JUDD LAKE surmised he might have been wrong. There was now no shadow at the bunkhouse window. He was glad no one had heard old Milt Saner's hare-brained speech.

Moreover, Judd had known old Milt too long to argue with him further. The order he had been given, and old Milt's crazy idea were the result of a mad determination that had been growing upon old Milt for many weeks.

And when Milt Saner made up his mind, Judd Lake had never seen the man who was big enough or smart enough to change it. If old Milt said he intended to bust the Bar-Q, then the Bar-Q would be busted.

But Judd made one more try.

"I'm knowin' this dude hoss rancher ain't heeled enough to know where he'll buy next Winter's beans," he said. "He's a plain out an' out fortune-hunter. But

couldn't we—ain't it jest as easy to drive that beef into a canyon pocket, an' sell it off after Woodley-Wharton has pulled in his horns?"

"You're doin' it liken I said!" snapped old Milt. "You'll drift them cows, an' come back with some showin' as to how this—this Black Ghost, say a rider in a black hood headin' his owlhoots, choused the beef through the Slash. You blow the dam, an' it'll look like this Black Ghost was in cahoots with some hombre who's wantin' Wildcat creek to turn the valley over Porcupine ridge into grazin' range."

"If that's the way you want it, Milt," acquiesced Judd finally and mournfully. "An' there comes Glory an' the dude now. Y'mean the powder is set at the dam, an' we're to make the drive this evenin'?"

"The powder's set," said old Milt with a tight mouth. "You drive the beef this evening. Do some shootin', but say you was surprised an' overcome, so's nobody will be hurt. Understand?"

Judd Lake clumped from the bunkhouse on his bowlegs.

Judd never had expected to see the day when he would do anything to blotch the good name of the Bar-Q. He was not given to any kind of double deal, but he had taken old Milt's orders too long to utter a flat refusal.

"If we can drive that beef into some holding pocket outside the Slash where the cows can feed, maybe old Milt will cool off in a few days," was Judd's last hope and thought at this minute.

GLORY'S eastern riding togs and her "postage stamp" saddle contributed to as delectable an eyeful of sweetly fashioned womanhood as had ever ridden the Pecos Valley range. Her bound hair was still a golden yellow, and her piquant face was tanned to match the warm tints of the coiled braids.

"Ah, there you are, father!" hailed the girl in a tone that had been like rubbing sandspurs into old Milt's ears. "Would it be too much to have Ching Lo prepare a special strawberry pie for dinner? I've invited Charles to stay and I have been praising Ching Lo's cooking."

"She has, indeed, Mr. Saner," nodded the pale-faced dude in the fancy pants. "You are most fortunate in having such a chef. I was unable to induce Walters—"

Old Milt's sharply bitten words were not of the kind to greet a welcome guest. They were not even printable.

Old Milt finished with, "Have Ching Lo fix up ary mess you can think up. If you'll be excusin' me, Mister Woodley-Wharton, I've got to mosey out to the upper range an' help out some cows that's been backward in their calvin'."

"Why, father—"

Without heeding what the suddenly flushed Glory intended to be a protest, old Milt strode across to the corral and fairly flung himself into his deep Mexican hull, sending his dun horse away with a vicious rake of his heels.

Judd Lake started to murmur, to excuse himself, but when he looked at Glory's eyes, it seemed to him they were dancing rather than showing any confusion.

"Your father doesn't appear to be quite himself," said Woodley-Wharton, looking as if he were undecided whether to go or stay.

"Oh, father is quite himself, isn't he, Judd?" observed Glory, and Judd Lake was sure now there was a slow, little smile puckering her curved mouth.

Judd made no reply, because at that moment Bill Starr, the most recent saddle tramp to be taken on as a rider, came around the corner of the bunkhouse. Starr looked all of the drifter in a ragged wool shirt and worn levis.

For all of his careless appearance and apparent reluctance to shave more than once a month, Starr was a likable cuss. He was a good rider, quick and sure with a rope, and easy with horses, and Judd Lake always took to a man like that.

"Excusin' it," said Starr, his gray eyes taking in Glory and her dude companion. "Not meanin' to horn in, but I've been waitin' to tell you, Judd, I'm rollin' my tarp. Want to light out right away, an' reckoned to make Pecos Bend for the night."

Starr's growth of beard did not quite

hide the cleanness of his long jaw and clear-cut features. His gray eyes and his mouth smiled together.

"Sudden, ain't it, Starr?" said Judd. "Hain't heard you was dissatisfied."

"It ain't that," said Starr. "But I can't seem to stay put. Seein' I drew a whole month's wages yesterday, thought I'd light a shuck while I'm heeled. It's about as much as I ever have."

"Never put a word in a man's way," stated Judd. "You're a top rider, Starr. Got the stuff to settle down—"

"Whoopee!" grinned Starr. "Guess I wasn't cut of that kind o' cloth. If it's the same to you, I'll be ridin'."

Judd Lake had a sudden remembrance, and a sobering thought. He was watching Glory's suddenly grave face, and the long look she was giving Bill Starr. He was sure the girl's mouth tightened some.

That was it. He recollected now seeing Glory talking with Bill Starr a few times in the cool of evening. And he had seen them riding together down by the river at least twice.

Starr, he recalled now, had hired on about the time Glory had come home from the Eastern school.

"I say, Mr. Starr," and Woodley-Wharton spoke suddenly. "If you desire to remain in this part of the country, I could give you a job handling my horses."

"Thanks," said Starr shortly. "But I'm afraid I wouldn't fit on a dude—I mean, on a hoss ranch."

WITH which ungracious speech, Starr turned away and strode toward the corral. Glory had not spoken, and so far as Judd could see, Starr had not so much as looked at the girl for a goodbye.

"Come on, Charles," said Glory quickly. "We'll see Ching Lo about that strawberry pie."

The hooded leader's hand snapped a signal. Judd's horse reared, pranced.

Judd thought Glory's speech too clipped, but the foreman was too much taken up with other trouble to give this too much mind. He guessed that Bill Starr's abrupt decision to leave might have been connected with Glory's recent riding about the range with the dude of the shoe-string horse ranch.

"Reckon old Milt would be twice as roiled if'n Glory had turned out to be the kind to smile on a saddle tramp," muttered Judd, as he climbed into the saddle and started to roust up the older hands he could trust to help him carry out old Milt's locoed orders.

Judd met up with five of the older hands riding in. They swore some over the unexpected word of a drive to be made, which the hands knew would take them well into the night.

As Judd headed back past the bunkhouse, he saw that Bill Starr was mounted and riding away. And the dude, Woodley-Wharton, apparently had been out by the corral talking with Starr just before he roweled his horse into the trail that went past the neighboring horse ranch and on to Pecos Bend.

Judd squinted when he made out the slim figure of Glory on the porch of the ranch house. He might have been mistaken, but it seemed to him the girl had waved a goodbye to Bill Starr.

"It'd been a heckuva good one on old Milt if she had tooken Starr serious," muttered Judd.

Thereafter, for an hour, Judd had his work cut out, convincing the five older riders that old Milt had ordered prime beef, ready for marketing, driven through the Slash into the badlands.

However, Judd tempered this order to his own notion.

"We're chousin' the cows on across the valley and into a pocket I know of that's got grass enough for a few days," he told the riders.

As for old Milt's reason for hazing two thousand fattened cows onto short feed, Judd kept buttoned up. Also he said nothing of the powder set at the dam which supplied Bar-Q with all of its water. No. He had to think on that, and if he did blow up the dam, he would do it all on his lonesome.

ALTHOUGH the sizable market herd was so placed as to make herding the cows into the Slash in Porcupine ridge a simple chore for a few riders, Judd Lake knew he would not find it so easy to frame the story that old Milt wanted to be spread about.

"I'll jest wait till the cows is pocketed, and I'll make out I'm shootin' at a coyote comin' back," muttered Judd as the cows crowded into the Slash trail, which was a gap through the ridge leading from one wide valley to another. "Only I'll have to tell the boys about the Black Ghost rustlin' yarn after that."

Here in the deep Slash it was murky dusk. Judd could hear the gurgle of the flume carrying water from the big pond above the dam on the ridge as they drove the herd past it.

There had been a time when Wildcat creek had divided its water between the two valleys. That way there had not been enough water for either of the possible grazing ranges.

Old Milt Saner had seen that diversion of the creek would make one of the valleys a prosperous grazing range, while drying up the other. He had chosen Pecos valley, because it was closer to Pecos Bend and the end of the railroad.

As no one had taken up any of the land in the other valley, the diversion dam had been approved by the state authority.

Judd was both worried and saddened as the bawling, protesting herd rolled out of the Slash into the other valley. Beyond this lay the *malpais*, miles of desert and canyons in which an army could have been hidden.

"Doggone Milt for a stubborn, weak-minded coot!" grunted Judd, as the other riders loped ahead to point up the straggling herd, and start moving toward the pocket canyon about two miles away. "It'd serve him right if some wanderin' owlhooters come along an' rustled the whole passel of 'em!"

While there was fair moonlight, the cows were not liking this unusual drive at night. There were too few riders if anything like a scattering started. It could quickly become a stampede, and the Bar-Q stuff really would end up all over the badlands.

Judd moved up, to help on point, and guide the herd toward the grazing pocket, where he hoped the Summer had not exhausted all the grama grass. "Humpy" Cotter was up there, and he hailed Judd.

"Of all the whangdanged foolishness!" complained Cotter. "Old Milt ain't right in the head! You tell me what this—"

Humpy Cotter got no farther. The thunder of moving cows had covered the clatter of running horses. Nearly a dozen riders loomed up in the valley, bearing directly down upon the point of the herd.

Judd Lake pulled up his nag abruptly, staring as if he had seen a ghost, or perhaps several ghosts. He had. The oncoming riders had guns out and metal flashing in the moonlight.

But it was not this that startled and chilled Judd to the bone. The leading rider was close enough now for his horse to show black in the moonlight. And the rider was hooded, masked with a flowing black cloth that was draped over his head and fell about his shoulders.

"Milt said a Black Ghost," groaned Judd. "Why, the double crossin' old rip!

He's framed it some way to have the stock took out'n our hands an' run off, an' that's why he said for me to say there was a Black Ghost! By heck! I'll show—"

Humpy Cotter swore a surprised oath, and Humpy was dragging at his single revolver. Judd had been too shocked to decide just what to do. The other riders were too far back along the drive to see what was happening.

JUDD'S mind was made up for him. The black-hooded leader reined up and before either Judd or Humpy could have started a fight against the odds that faced them, a hard voice cracked out, and Judd saw that they were covered by drawn guns that could not miss.

"Ain't knowin' how come you're drivin' no place, but we'll take the cows from here! Ain't aimin' to kill nobody, but bein' new in these parts, we're playin' careful!"

"Like the devil!" rasped Judd, and would have got his one gun into action, but he was too late.

The hooded leader evidently knew his business. His hand snapped a signal. There was sudden cracking of rifles. Judd's horse reared and was spooked, prancing to one side.

Judd saw Humpy shoot once, but he apparently failed to hit any of the hooded riders. Then the leaders of the herd were bawling and piling up, swerving the point to one side toward the downward slant of the dry valley.

For the next few minutes, Judd had all he could do to keep his horse from being caught by tossing heads and thundering feet of the spooked cows. Shooting and yelling, the dozen or so owlhooters wheeled the herd leaders into the beginning of a stampede that gathered swift momentum.

Unaware of what had happened at the point of the herd, the other Bar-Q riders on the drag were balked at getting into action by the speed of the surprise. Humpy Cotter's horse had fallen and thrown him, and Judd finally got down to find that Humpy was stunned but not badly hurt.

By the time the Bar-Q riders had come together, the herd they had driven from the Slash was thundering away down the dry valley. The hooded riders were fast and all had vanished with the body of the stampede before the few milling cows on the drag had reached them.

The riders were all for giving chase, but Judd Lake stopped that. He was thinking hard. His anger boiled, directed at old Milt.

"He wouldn't have thought of Black Ghost, if he hadn't knowed what he had in mind," concluded Judd. "So if that's the way he wants it, that's the way it'll have to be."

Enraged, Judd then handed what he believed was the truth to the other Bar-Q men.

"Milt wants it this way, so this is the way it is," he concluded. "Says he's goin' bust, all to teach Glory a lesson an' show up that whang-danged dude hoss rancher. Wants I should blow up the dam, too, but I ain't puttin' a hand to it."

He headed the swearing, discomfited riders through the Slash. One and all they said they were quitting here and now. Seeing that old Milt was headed for the rocks, Judd could see no good reason why they should stick to the Bar-Q, and told them so.

"I'm quittin' myself," he announced. "Soon as I see how Milt's cock-eyed notion takes with the gal. Ain't sayin' it won't be for her good, but when Milt thinks he can start all over again—"

Judd bit it off. For he knew deep inside him that he would stick with the stubborn ranch owner as long as he could be of any help. Maybe so, he thought, he could now get somewhere with an argument.

They were coming out of the Slash.

"Milt'll be keenin' his ears to hear the dam blowed up," said Judd. "But he can keep on listenin'. I've got a few things to say to him about pullin' that Black Ghost rustlin' trick."

The words had scarcely been spoken when there was a muffled, booming blast up on Porcupine ridge. Again Judd Lake swore fervently.

"He didn't take ary chance on that either!" he concluded. "We might as well

roll our tarps now, all o' us. With the water turned into the other valley, the Bar-Q won't be worth foreclosin' the mortgage Lafe Skinner's been holdin'."

"YOU know all-fired well they was a Black Ghost bunch o' owlhooters run off them cows, Milt!"

Exasperated beyond all caution, Judd Lake faced old Milt Saner out by the horse corral. Five riders of the night before and some of the others were preparing to roll their tarps over in the bunkhouse.

"Sounds convincin', Judd, the way you're puttin' yore heart into it," drawled old Milt, his smiling mouth drawing up his drooping mustache in a way that made him look happy. "Jest keep on tellin' folks about the Black Ghost, an' maybe you'll come to believe it yourself."

"You plague-ridden, prevaricatin' old rooster," grated Judd. "You sure run a ranny onto me, but leastwise you didn't prod me into blowin' the dam. Reckon you know by now that they ain't dinero enough to switch that water back onto the Bar-Q now. It split the ridge plumb open."

"Afeared to own up to what yuh was ordered to do?" taunted old Milt. "Do the rest o' the hands know you lit that powder fuse?"

Judd Lake glared at old Milt. He had a great desire to twist the owner's scrawny neck in his big hands.

"Who'd you git to bust the dam, if you didn't do it?" demanded Judd. "You cantankerous, schemin' double-crosser! Wasn't nobody knowed about that powder but me an' you, I hope."

"Hold yore hosses, Judd," said old Milt slowly. "Let's git this sorted out. I'm sayin' you're makin' a good yarn out'n the Black Ghost rustlers. But when yuh intimate yuh didn't bust the dam, they ain't none but me an' you could-a done it."

Stocky, red-faced Judd Lake and old Milt looked into each other's eyes and didn't like the truth that seemed to be there.

"I've been thinkin'," said Judd slowly. "They was a Black Ghost owlhooter in a hood, an' they was a dozen rustlers with him. If you didn't stir up that mess, then it was more than happenstance."

"Meanin' some'n heard what passed between us 'fore yuh made that drive?" muttered old Milt. "Judd, we'll let this lay as she is for now. Skinner's note falls due in five days. It's for forty thousand. They's twenty thousan' cash in the bank, an' sellin that market herd would've paid off an' give me runnin' expenses for more'n a year to come, which I ain't wantin'. The herd's gone, an' it's worth it to see Lafe Skinner when he finds out the Bar-Q has turned dry range overnight, but—"

Judd hissed a warning, but he was too late. Glory, tricked out in a curve-fitting rig, was stepping lightly around the corner of the corral.

"But I'll be teetotally hung for a hoss thief if'n I'll let ary Black Ghost git away with rustlin' that herd!" finished old Milt. "No sirree, Bob! If a reward will snag him, I'll have all Pecos Bend brush-poppin' the lowdown thief out'n the badlands!"

GLORY came on, and her face was probably the prettiest picture of downright worry to be found in ten states.

"I have been informed of all the trouble, father," stated Glory, with a sidelong glance at Judd Lake. "Is it true that you might lose the ranch if you can't meet your mortgage note?"

Old Milt's eyes sought Judd's with a knowing, foxy look. Apparently it was his day to gloat and he wanted it to be impressed upon Glory that all that had been her rightful inheritance had been rubbed out in one double stroke.

"Yes, daughter, you have heard nothing but the truth," and he tried imitating her Eastern accent. "The Bar-Q has been wiped out clean. Meanin' me an' you, daughter, ain't ary place to lay our heads after Lafe Skinner satisfies his grasping soul by taking what's left of the stock, an' sells out the whole home place."

Glory's reaction was wholly unexpected. She came over and laid a small, tanned hand upon old Milt's shoulder.

"Now don't you worry about me, father," she said. "Or about yourself. I am discussing this with Charles this morning. He will know what is best to do. Here he comes now."

Judd and old Milt stared at the dude rider with the fancy pants. Old Milt was muttering words not meant for Glory's ears.

"Dagnation!" he concluded. "Maybe he ain't got the straight o' it yet. But as soon as he's learnt it—"

Old Milt's belief seemed suddenly confirmed. Glory was tripping toward Charles Woodley-Wharton's blooded bay horse, her face all smiles. The dude's greeting stopped her like a bullet striking.

"I say, Miss Saner!" exclaimed the pale-faced scion of a cultured family background. "I'm no end sorry. But we will have to postpone our ride this morning. I have been called suddenly to Pecos Bend on business. Perhaps we can ride some other time."

"Why, Charles—oh, that is all right—I understand—"

For the first time since her return Glory appeared unsure of her diction. It was sufficient for Woodley-Wharton, for he inclined his head, turned the blooded bay and touched him with the steel.

"Of all the cold-deckin', mutton-mannered slickers!" shouted old Milt. "Glory! I'll take that dude—"

Judd put a hand on his arm. "Ain't that what you was angling for, Milt?" he interrupted. "The less said—"

Glory's small head came up. Trim and straight, she walked toward the house, not looking at old Milt or Judd.

"The lowdown rapscallion!" exclaimed old Milt. "Tol' yuh he'd welch out! Jest to make sure he don't have no change of mind, I'm makin' it good!"

Without saying how he could make matters worse, or better, old Milt strode over to his saddled horse, got aboard, and sent him pounding toward the Pecos Bend trail.

WHEN he rode in late that night, old Milt Saner was silent over what might have happened in Pecos Bend.

Judd Lake started out the next day. By noon he had a fair idea that all the water of Wildcat creek was trickling through the thirsty soil of the valley beyond Porcupine Ridge.

He had an idea then that brought a glint into his eyes.

"Milt's still got twenty thousan' cash," he mused. "He can buy up the valley for a song. Lafe Skinner will be stung proper. Milt can start up a new Bar-Q, havin' rid himself of that fancy pants dude. Glory'll git over it."

But as he rode back toward the home buildings, Judd suddenly became aware that an almighty lot of riders appeared to have taken up the hunt for the Black Ghost herd raider. A dozen scattered posses were crossing Porcupine Ridge and riding toward the badlands.

"Never seen such a manhunt," muttered Judd. "Reckon though I'd best shag over to Pecos myself an' line up that valley range 'fore some o' them town jaspers wises up to what that diverted water means."

So it happened Judd rode up to the courthouse in Pecos Bend without tarrying to inquire what had prodded the entire town into combing the *malpais* for a mysterious Black Ghost owlhooter. In fact, Judd was beginning to doubt old Milt again.

"Sure as sin the ol' coot framed that Black Ghost raid," said Judd as he tied to the courthouse rack. "Maybe so he stirred up the big hunt just to make it look good."

At the moment Judd was blissfully unaware of what means old Milt had taken to set the whole town upon the trail of a vanished Black Ghost. He was to find out with a cold shock of understanding very soon.

First though, another shock awaited him.

"I'd like to find out about what it would take to settle on the valley land eastward o' Porcupine Ridge?" said Judd to Mooney, the shriveled probate clerk.

Mooney peered over steel-rimmed spectacles and shook his head.

"'Fraid you're a mite too late, Judd,"

he said. "That same passel o' land has all been took over by filin' on an' payin' up some five thousan' or so cash on old settlers' claims. Made out the rightful papers for the whole danged valley only yesterday."

Judd had a feeling of quick elation. Then old Milt had been smart. That must have been why he had visited Pecos Bend.

"Yeah, I'd forgot about Milt sayin' he'd handle it himself," he said, to cover his surprise.

"Y'mean Milt Saner?" Mooney shook his head. "Huhuh, Judd. It wasn't Milt. The whole valley's been took over by that Woodley-Wharton fella. Said somethin' about it bein' what he wanted for a bigger hoss ranch."

Judd knew all the words he might have employed. But they were not fit to be spoken within the confines of the county's law building.

Judd stalked down the corridor. He noticed the sheriff's office door was closed, and a small sign had been posted there.

The sign had been hastily scribbled. It read—

> Anybody having sheriff's business will have to postpone it. We have joined the hunt for the lawless Black Ghost rustler. All and sundry are entitled to bring in the Black Ghost dead or alive. Twenty thousand dollars, cash in hand, has been deposited with this office as a reward by Milton Saner, of the Bar-Q ranch. This sum will be paid in its entirety to the party or parties bringing in the Black Ghost.
>
> SHERIFF CLEM AKERS.

Judd walked from the courthouse in a daze. He went over to the Two Spot saloon and downed three straight glasses of chain lightning without ever batting an eye.

JUDD LAKE was red-eyed and sick when he reached the Bar-Q the morning after Pecos Bend had destroyed all of his faith in mankind. He alighted at the corral, ground-hitched his horse, and went to the bunkhouse.

"I'll roll the old tarp while I've still got the strength," he groaned. "If'n I so much as set eyes on old Milt, I'll never be able to keep from popping him."

There was a sudden commotion near the bunkhouse. Evidently somebody had beaten Judd to popping old Milt. Leastwise, it was old Milt who was cursing and tumbling backward at the corner of the bunkhouse.

Then old Milt was up and, with his head lowered, he charged back out of Judd's range of vision. Old Milt was roaring.

"Where'd yuh take 'er, yuh misbred son? An' yuh have the guts to come here bluffin' with yore offer to pay off'n the note on the Bar-Q! I'll learn yuh!"

Judd shagged over. There was fancy pants Woodley-Wharton.

"I said I would pay off the note, just to be neighborly," got in the pale-faced dude. "As for Glory, she was riding with me late yesterday, but left me, saying she was returning home."

"Yuh bald-faced liar!" yelled old Milt and he aimed a knockout swing at the dude's chin.

To Judd's amazement the dude did not strike back, nor seem to do more than step sideways and flick out one hand. Yet old Milt somehow heeled backward and repeated the pants-slamming tumble to the dusty ground.

Judd inserted his stocky figure between the dude and old Milt.

"Dally it, Milt," he admonished, his mind mostly upon what had been said about Glory. "You know the whereabouts of Glory, Mister Woodley-Wharton? Seems as how that comes first in order."

"The sneakin' coyote—"

"Shut up, Milt!" Judd was madder than a hornet now. "Whassay, Woodley-Wharton?"

"Glory rode toward home at dark last night," stated the dude. "I have not seen her since. I rode over with an offer to buy up the Bar-Q note from this Lafe Skinner and extend it as long as Saner might want it."

Judd snorted and let go with all of his repressed anger.

"You couldn't maybe explain how

come yuh grabbed onto the yonder valley that'll be watered by the divertin' of Wildcat creek, Mr. Woodley-Wharton? Or did yuh have that in mind when yuh blowed up the Bar-Q dam?"

Old Milt goggled at Judd.

"Grabbed the valley—blowed up the dam?" exploded old Milt. "Lemme at him, Judd! The snake-bellied fortune-hunter! He's took my Glory, an' he's holdin' her for ransom, that's what."

"Mite twisted in yore logistics, ain't yuh, Milt?" drawled Judd. "For a money-hunter, this dude's suddenly flashin' an all-fired lot o' dinero. Couldn't be that he's stubbed his toe onto a handy fortune, like the market price for some two thousan' head o' prime beef that'd go at around forty or fifty apiece?"

It seemed to Judd that Woodley-Wharton's bloodless face grew paler, if that could be. And old Milt was suddenly edging over and eyeing Judd's holstered gun, as if he had fatal gunsmoke on his mind.

Woodley-Wharton made a sad mistake then.

"Someone informed you that my riders helped carry out Mr. Saner's desire to become entirely insolvent?" spoke the dude, making it an admission and a question together. "I can explain—"

OLD MILT caught Judd with an unexpected punch in the stomach. He had Judd's revolver before Judd could unravel his contorted midriff. With a yell of rage, old Milt whipped up the gun, thumbing back the hammer as it centered upon the dude's breastbone.

Judd tried to find strength to intervene. But it was the pale-faced dude himself who dived as the gun came up. What happened would forever be a mystery to both Judd and old Milt.

The gun exploded. At the moment, however, old Milt had become afflicted with an ankle hold that sent him into an acrobatic backward somersault, such as he could never have performed in his younger and spryest days.

Then Woodley-Wharton had the gun and old Milt was on his hands and knees, cussing and shaking his head like a goat that had butted by mistake into hard-rock.

Judd had recovered his breath, and with it had come an enlightening thought. He recollected that the departing Bill Starr, saddle drifter, had conversed with Woodley-Wharton just before lighting a shuck off the Bar-Q.

Also, there had been a shadow at a window when old Milt had given his order to drive off his herd, blow the dam, and otherwise bust the Bar-Q flatter than a pancake. Come to think on it, Judd had not heard any word of Bill Starr having been in Pecos Bend.

"Wait, Milt," counseled Judd. "It couldn't be that a no-good range tramp give yuh ideas, could it, Woodley-Wharton?"

What the dude might have replied was interrupted by the arrival of riders. Judd was speechless as he saw Sheriff Lem Akers and a few town members of a posse.

And Glory was riding on one side of the sheriff, while on the other rode a slim, erect figure whose hard grin and gray eyes showed a defiant scorn for the steel jangling on his wrists.

"Bill Starr?" exclaimed Judd and old Milt together.

"William?" gasped Woodley-Wharton, but nobody paid him any heed.

"Well, here we are, Saner!" hailed Sheriff Akers. "Reckon the Black Ghost has been caught dead to rights! This is him, Saner, an' they ain't anything I can do but pay over yore twenty thousan' reward money."

"Yes, father," stated Glory gravely before old Milt could quit swallowing his tongue. "I claim the twenty thousand for delivering the Black Ghost, along with some eighty-odd thousand received for the beef cows sold by the Black Ghost and loaded over at Comanche."

Judd Lake thought Glory's face was a bit pale under its tan, but the light in the girl's wide eyes puzzled him. Old Milt was the first to recover from shock.

"You can't pay—she can't c'llect—she's my own daughter—sheriff, arrest this misfitted, fancy panted dude—he helped

run off my cows—he blowed my dam—he stole—"

It seemed to Judd that Bill Starr was almighty calm for a cattle rustler who might be facing prison bars for the rest of his life. In truth, the saddle drifter's stomach muscles were rippling as if inward laughter was about to break forth.

But it was Glory who for the second time caused old Milt to try to swallow his tongue.

"No, father," said Glory softly. "It was I who caused the explosion at the dam. It was what you wanted, wasn't it? You were heard to issue an order to Judd Lake that it be blown up. Besides, it was a convenient way to defeat Lafe Skinner's taking the Bar-Q after he had collected much more in interest than you ever owed him on the principal of the loan that built the dam years ago."

OLD MILT was storing up words that Judd was sure would cause any self-respecting polecat to crawl into a hole and stuff its ears. Old Milt got out, "Yuh blowed up the dam, Glory? Yuh wiped out the work of a lifetime—yuh meant to ruin me—yuh connived with this—this white-blooded, snaky dude to bankrupt the dad what hand-raised yuh an'—"

"Whope, Milt," interrupted Judd, having seen something that he was not meant to observe. "Don't go hypercritical over bein' outsmarted on yore own fool notion to go bust. I'm opinin' that Glory has some more talkin' to do."

"Hey, wait a minute," rasped Sheriff Akers. "Let's don't keep gittin' off the subject. What's this about stealing a valley, and what am I supposed to do with the Black Ghost, now that he's caught an' the cow money has been paid over to the smartest gal ever born on the Pecos?"

"Jut this—this Black Ghost in jail—arrest—put this dude with him—" Old Milt was trying to savvy something of all this amazing situation.

"Your valley is not stolen, father," stated Glory. "We had an idea the other side of the ridge would be a better place to build a new house, and there will be twice the range for grazing that we had on the Bar-Q."

"We had an idea?" shouted old Milt. "Who had an idea? Who's we?"

"Why, father, my husband and I," said Glory calmly. "Then you seemed to want to throw away everything, so we picked it up."

"Yore husband?" yelled old Milt. "Yuh ain't hitchin' up with no dandefied dude. Not even if he's turned yore head an' set you ag'in' yore own dad. Him havin' you take my beef money, an' the reward to buy the land that was mine by all rights."

Judd felt as if he had a box seat at a good bronc-busting show. He saw Charles Woodley-Wharton turning his head and smiling. He noticed that Bill Starr looked bored, rubbing the back of a manacled hand across his square chin.

"Not your money, father," smiled Glory. "Not one cent of it. Charles is planning to spend nearly half a million on a blooded horse ranch, but he is turning your valley, bought with a small part of his own money, back to you."

"Dang my time!" roared old Milt. "I still ain't consentin' to yore marryin' a slicker that comes misrepresentin' himself to be a fortune-hunter—"

"I'd swaller my tongue an' keep it down until it sorts out some kind o' sense, Milt," murmured Judd.

"Look, folks!" Sheriff Akers was becoming restless.

"All right, father," agreed Glory unexpectedly. "I promise you that I will not marry Charles, never. I haven't even thought of it. Besides Charles is bringing his wife and two children out from the East as soon as he has a place ready for them."

Old Milt stared at the girl. Sheriff Akers grunted, then renewed his protest.

"How about this Black Ghost—this Bill Starr, Saner?" he demanded. "He admits running off your cows, but says he can prove you had ordered them drifted into the badlands, and that he was only trying to salvage them."

"I don't care howsoever he stole the beef!" grated old Milt, sure he was on the right track this time. "Yuh can see he's

an owlhooter, hirin' himself out to lawful ranchers to steal an'—"

"You can't do that, father," interrupted Glory once more. "I don't intend to have my husband in prison when my first baby is born."

There was a long minute of dazed silence all around.

Then old Milt groaned. "The Black Ghost—this Bill Starr—no, Glory, no. He couldn't be yore husband."

"But he is, father. He has been for more than a year now. We thought you would take some time getting used to it, so we didn't say anything. You see, father, he is Woodley-Wharton's cousin, and he inherited almost as much of the family money as Charles. But he wanted to learn cattle-raising at firsthand—"

While Sheriff Akers was unlocking the handcuffs, Bill Starr grinned broadly.

"I think we'll hit it off, dad, when you get used to me," he said. "Anyway didn't I help you out when you wanted to go bust?"

JUDD LAKE put his hand on old Milt's shoulder.

"Easy does it," he advised softly. "Yuh didn't want ary fortune-hunter in the family. Yuh got yore wish. Now yuh can sit back an' take yore rest and—"

"Git away from me, Judd!" exploded old Milt. "Yuh dang' slow-minded walloper! Do yuh think I didn't know it all the time?"

"Yup, Milt," nodded Judd. "That's just what I think."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Speed Western Stories, published monthly at Springfield, Mass., September 30, 1944.

State of New York
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Frank Armer, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Speed Western Stories and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Trojan Publishing Corp., 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Kenneth Duchman, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Wilton Matthews, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Business Manager, Frank Armer, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Trojan Publishing Corp., 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Frank Armer, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Michael Estrow, 114 East 47th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; G. Donenfeld, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; J. E. Wasserman, 801 Harries Bldg., Dayton, Ohio.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is .....
(This information is required from daily publications only.)

FRANK ARMER, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 13th day of September, 1944.
[Seal]

ALFRED B. YAFFE.
(My commission expires March 30, 1946)

BUZZARD

Rusty Malone was a red-headed Irishman, a rancher new to this frontier range. It rubbed him plenty the wrong way to be suspected of being the leader of a bushwhacking rustler gang—and it seemed his only chance to erase the suspicion was to take more long, dangerous chances than the vigilantes or the rustlers themselves . . .

"Get back to your hoss or I'll let you have it!" she told him.

HIS neighbors' suspicion hedged in "Rusty" Malone like invisible barbed wire. The young owner of the Riata spread could feel the doubt of his honesty holding the four ranchers who had ridden over this morning to make known a decision.

That his four friends and fellow cowmen, of six months acquaintance, should have held a palaver and made up their minds in his absence was direct evidence of their distrust. They tried to keep it out of their eyes and voices, but it was there, like a flat-handed slap in the face.

"It comes to this, Malone," stated Longan, the graying and leather-faced owner of the PB. "Somebody in the valley has to be in cahoots with these here raiders. They ain't workin' under any known owlhoot leader. In three forays that robbed us of more than half of three trail drives to Black Horse the rustlers had to have advance information when we would hit Goatfoot Canyon."

BAIT

By T. V. FAULKNER

"Hadda be timed to the minute, the way we've figured it out," added Donner, of the X-Bar, shrugging his blocky shoulders. "The devils had their gulchers planted all three times in tricky spots where they couldn't have stayed longer than a couple o' hours."

Rusty Malone swallowed hard, fighting back an anger aroused by his instinctive understanding that there had been a reason for these four meeting without him to form an opinion. They, the five owners of the valley, had agreed three months before to combine forces on their market drives.

This had been decided after each spread had lost small lots of cows in range raids. Their three monthly drives had been disastrous, the losses heavy.

"I take it you fellas have fixed your sights on somebody in the valley?" said Rusty Malone, choosing his words. "Maybe some rider what's been hired on recent?"

HARDEN, of the LZ, lifted his dark eyes, seeming to aim at Rusty Malone along his sharp nose. He spoke, sparing of his words, through his tight line of a mouth.

"No rider was took in on the time of ary drive until we was ready to bunch the cows," said Harden, his tone having the plain intent to eliminate all hired hands.

That left Carlson, overfed and fun-loving owner of the 2-Dot, who nearly always had a joke to tell. A frown took the smoothness from his round face.

"They're meanin', Malone," said Carlson gravely, "that this has to be somebody who knowed at least a day ahead of the start for the canyon. They's five of us."

Coming from Carlson, this had almost the weight of an accusation. These four, Longan, Donner, Harden, and Carlson had been years in the valley. Rusty Malone had bought the big open graze along the mountain hogback but six months before.

No man in that country ever asked another man whence he had come or why. This was still frontier country. Tucked away in the Sangre de Cristos, the valley would probably stay that way for generations.

Rusty Malone was young. He had been a wild one, but clean. Perhaps these neighbors, always so friendly heretofore, had heard that he had turned up his stake for the Riata spread on one lucky hand at cards.

Rusty alone knew that lucky deal could have marked the line where he might have chosen another trail, had he lost. But he had never gunned any man and he had combed the wildness out of his red hair and come to this valley cold.

His blood boiled now. He chose to ignore what had been implied. A sudden thought helped him.

"You said they's five of us, Carlson," he mused slowly. "It leaves out one who hadn't any cows in the drives, but who was took in on it beforehand on account of us havin' to cross his land to the Hump spring for waterin'."

Because his skin was thin, the flicker of the eyes over his remark seemed to say his suggestion only confirmed their suspicion. That he had mentioned this as a throw-off.

"Meanin' o' course, 'Jinx' Jevers, of the hard luck Pothole," said Longan, his tired eyes apparently showing his disbelief that old Jinx Jevers could be considered. "You're new or yuh wouldn't have said that, Malone. Jevers has been rasslin' a tough livin' out of a few cows in the Pothole for twenty years."

"Jevers has been hirin' hisself out to all-a us in tight times to piece out an existence," spoke up Donner, shrugging his blocky shoulders as if that dismissed it. "Even if he is so situated nigh to the spine as to maybe have the easiest contact with any owlhoots holin' up in the badlands."

Harden had a scowl on his dark, thin face. But his words came as a surprise to Rusty Malone.

"Yeah, Jinx Jevers has been amongst us for years," he agreed with Longan and Donner. "But sometimes a man's mind slips when he finds hisself gittin' old an' still scrapin' the bottom o' the barrel. I think Malone has a right to his opinion."

It was the usually carefree Carlson who put in a sudden clincher.

"I've got me an idea," offered Carlson. "First though, I'm tellin' Malone the straight of what we'd chewed over. Malone, you took over the graze you've called the Riata. All o' us has been well-stocked. You ain't more'n a tenth the cows yore land would fatten. You're a newcomer, an' it's got to that point where we've gotta know what's what."

FOR ALL of his anger, Rusty could see the sense in that drift. He started to speak, but Carlson stopped him with one fat hand held up.

"S'pose," said Carlson, "Malone rides over to the Pothole an' bring Jinx Jevers back to the Riata this same day. If Jevers has gone off his mind an' morals, an' he could be connivin' with these here raiders, what would happen if it was surmised that Jevers had been trapped, an' we was aimin' to make him say who he was in cahoots with?"

"Don't believe it of Jevers," growled Longan. "But I'd say if it was true, them owlhoots would like as not aim to make

sure Jevers didn't do no talkin' or name no names."

"That's smart, Longan," nodded the hawk-faced Harden. "Yeah, if it should so happen to be Jevers, it's more'n likely the owlhoots keep an eye on the Pothole. If Malone was to act as if he was takin' Jevers contrary to his will, it might bait the buzzards into showin' their hand."

"I don't quite savvy it, but maybe it makes sense," agreed Longan, shaking his gray head. "Come to think on it, Malone, yuh ain't ever met up with Jinx Jevers, have yuh?"

"No," said Rusty. "Seems like our trails never mixed. All I know of him is what you fellas have said. Even when we drove trail herd through the Pothole I missed Jevers personally."

Rusty Malone was holding his temper. That he was in a tight in the minds of his four neighbors had no justification, as he knew himself.

But the blunt, inescapable fact remained that only six men knew of the timing of three trail herd drives. Only this same six now knew of a fourth market drive being planned for two weeks from this day.

It seemed taken for granted among the four cowmen—Longan, Donner, Harden and Carlson—that they, long-time ranchers of the valley, were above any suspicion. That impressed Rusty Malone, even though his more recent ownership of the Riata had laid him open to the first suspicion of the others.

And yet he was rather regretting he had mentioned Jinx Jevers. From what he had heard of him, the old man had met with tough luck for many years. His few cows had seldom paid out and he had been forced to hire out on roundups and at calf-branding time to keep himself in grub.

Faced, however, with the brand of possible guilt in the minds of those he had hoped to keep as long-time friends, Rusty came to the only possible decision. "Whatever you have been thinkin', an' whatever may come of this, I ain't admirin' the chore," he said. "Maybe I can make it easy on old Jevers, invitin' him over—"

"That won't git nowhere," interrupted Carlson, unexpectedly. "Nope. Yuh gotta make it look like it's dead serious, Malone."

Harden and Donner nodded. Only Longan still showed his disapproval.

"I'll use my own judgment," said Rusty finally. "I've never been on the Pothole, except to go through at night with the herds. I'll be back with Jevers come sundown. The cook will roust you fellas some chuck."

"Reckon we'd best come ridin' to meet you," suggested Carlson. "If they could be anything to Jevers an' the rustlers, you might meet up with trouble."

"Yup, that's so," said Harden, his dark eyes thoughtful. "An', Malone, you'd best wear two guns an' tote the Winchester. Reckon they ain't nothin' to it, but you wouldn't want to be caught flat."

When Rusty Malone headed his black gelding toward the Pothole high under the mountain spine, his Winchester rode in the saddle boot.

RUSTY MALONE had never been one to think ill of another man. He had missed a few times in taking other hombres at face value, but here in the valley he had accepted his neighbors as four-square.

Still, knowing his own conscience, Rusty was thinking harder than ever before in his twenty-five years. Had there been an undercurrent of thinking among his four fellow ranchers?

Had any one of the four had a reason for wanting suspicion first cast upon him, then have had another idea after Jinx Jevers had been brought into the conversation?

It was not good thinking, but it had its points. Away from his neighbors, Rusty could take them apart more coldly.

As he passed over a ridge that would verge down to the Pothole, Rusty could see all of the wide spread of the thousands of acres of the valley. Nowhere had he ever seen better all-year grazing or more abundant water, with ample shelter for Winter.

The Don Adrone who had once owned

all of this in a single vast ranchero had named it *Valle de Poco Cielo*, meaning *Valley of the Little Heaven.*

Rusty had dreamed of it some day becoming just that for him. Some day when his Riata was fully stocked. When he could find the woman such a homestead ranch should have.

His first six months had added to his hopeful dream. He knew neighbors were important, and he had found the kind of men he had liked.

Longan, of the PB, aging, mellow, and kindly.

Donner, of the X-Bar, bluff and hearty.

Harden, LZ, a dark, shrewd man, but apparently always looking out for the interest of the whole valley.

Carlson, of the 2-Dot, cheerful and fun to have around.

Today the grim shadow of suspicion had come among them. It had fallen first upon Malone. Knowing himself, in turn Rusty could but find a growing doubt of

He had her tight in his arms when Longan and Jevers came in.

all the others in the little valley.

This was in his mind as he rode down into the Pothole. The ramshackle buildings, stable, corrals, and split-log shack of the one-man cow ranch did not look inviting.

Jinx Jevers, shaggy of hair and long of scraggly beard, was no more to be admired than his layout. As Rusty rode up, Jevers lifted himself lazily from the cabin step, his eyes dull in their thickly browed setting.

For all of his apparently torpid eyes, Jinx Jevers showed a quick furtiveness as he looked at Rusty.

"How-de-do," greeted Rusty, waiting to hear the expected "light down" customary with any stranger.

"Yah?" grunted Jevers, and Rusty noted the quick turn of his head, as if

he were making a survey of the rimrock that hedged in this home pocket of the Pothole.

Jevers was wearing patched, nondescript clothes. His long beard was stained. But over all he was of the same good size as Rusty and his slow movement appeared to be more of choice than of age.

Rusty said: "I'm your neighbor, Malone."

"Yah? I've seen yuh . . . Yuh be wantin' suthin'?"

THIS was scarcely the hospitality of the Valley of Little Heaven. Jevers' tone was surly and he might as well have said, "Name your business and be on your way."

Rusty got down anyway. He saw then that Jevers' grimy hand had strayed to his belt and the butt of the old revolver holstered there. Again Jevers cocked an eye toward the door of his cabin, then upward to the rimrock that crowded down upon it here.

Rusty had not before really suspected that Jevers might be the contact for the thieving raiders. He had come on this chore with but a vague idea of what it might accomplish.

On the way he had even permitted himself to think over the possibility of one of his other four neighbors having gone bad. Now Jinx Jevers was creating the first real suspicion that Rusty had had.

It was certain that his visit was unwelcome. It was also evident that Jevers was furtively looking and listening for something or somebody.

"Yeah, I'm wanting something," said Rusty abruptly. "I'm here to fetch you over for a palaver with the other ranchers in the valley."

"Me?" Jevers' voice was suddenly sharp. "Yuh git nothin' but tired pants if that's why yuh come. I ain't goin' no place, an' yuh kin fork yore nag an' git."

Rusty tried grinning at the cantankerous cuss, but the response was unexpected. He had not moved to get back in the saddle, and Jevers made a sudden dart of his hand. It brought the old revolver out, pointed at Rusty's face.

"Longan an' the others said you was to come along," tried Rusty placatingly.

"If yuh ain't in that hull 'fore I can spit, I'll—"

This had turned out seriously. Rusty had not even wanted to suspect old Jevers. In fact, even now he could lay Jevers' stubbornness to age and the possible slipping of his time-weary mind, as one of the others had suggested.

But Rusty had ridden over to take Jevers back with him. And a bullet from that old .45 could be just as lethal as lead from the iron of a gunnie.

"I'll sure ventilate yore hide," finished Jevers.

Rusty acted swiftly. He partly turned as if to swing back to the saddle. But he paused, whipping his eyes to the rimrock behind and above old Jevers.

"So that's what you been watching for!" exclaimed Rusty.

Jevers wasn't smart enough to sense the trick. His shaggy head turned, his dull eyes leaving Rusty. There could be no doubt that Jevers had been expecting something or someone to appear.

Rusty dived from his toes, vised onto Jevers' gun wrist and punched into the old man's beard just hard enough to set him down.

Old Jevers was tougher than Rusty had guessed. Rusty was caught by Jevers' knees jerking up into his stomach. Jevers' arms flailed out and a knuckled fist slammed under Rusty's ear.

At that Rusty found he would have to go to town with the old man or he might find himself getting the worst of it. Another blow nearly flattened his nose.

Then Rusty let Jevers have it on the chin where the thick beard cushioned the punch. Jevers sighed and sank down, his arms spreading inertly.

Rusty was getting up, considering his next move.

"I guess you have been in cahoots with the rustlers after all!" he said harshly to the old man who was still trying to get up and whose eyes had opened. "I'm havin' to take you for cow-stealin', Jevers!"

"You'll do nothing like it, mister!"

a clear voice said with seathing emphasis. "Now you get your hands in sight and mosey back to your hoss! Be quick about it or I'll let you have it!"

RUSTY was so fascinated by the surprise, and the vivid, pretty face framed by black, flowing hair that the small rifle she pointed at him did not impress him at first. She was a slight girl, but the long, tight skirt hinted that she was properly curved. Her feet were encased in beaded moccasins.

To say that Rusty was taken back would be to put it mildly.

"You don't understand—" he began.

"I heard enough!" snapped the girl, and he saw that she had blue eyes that contrasted with her black hair. "I'll give you just time to climb in your saddle. If you don't—"

Rusty drawled out, "You're holdin' all the cards, miss," and turned his back toward her.

He knew she would look toward old Jevers and she did. Rusty performed a fast spin, dropping and skidding toward the girl.

The Sharps rifle crashed with the hard barrel flattening Rusty's ear. He tightened his circling arms about the girl's legs and she screamed and sat down suddenly.

Rusty's face was buried for seconds against her and he felt so foolish that his ears burned. He forgot any compunction he might have had in the next thirty seconds.

She was like some hissing wildcat as she clawed at his head and nearly tore off his ears. Disliking to subdue the girl with a sleep-producing fist, Rusty was getting all the worst of it.

Old Jevers added to his discomfiture and lessened any chance to stop the girl by easy methods. Jevers might have used his gun, which lay on the ground, but luckily he seemed to forget it.

But he grabbed onto Rusty's ankles, jerking him down when he attempted to get his balance. Jevers was cursing wildly. Between lurid oaths he was resenting the charge he faced.

"Yuh spavined rapscallion!" squawked Jevers. "Sayin' I'm a cow-rustler! Yuh lie through yore teeth, yuh carrot-headed no-account come-lately! I'll take yuh apart an' feed yuh to the hawgs, misnamin' me a thief!"

Half blinded by the girl's flying claws, his midriff stretched until the skin seemed about to crack and his body swinging between the girl and old Jevers, Rusty really got mad about it all.

Suspended by old Jevers' hands on his ankles, Rusty let go at last with a sudden smash of knuckles that flattened the girl's rounded chin, tilted her head back and set her down kerthump.

Old Jevers made the mistake then of letting go of Rusty's ankles with the idea of whopping into him with his fists. Rusty caught Jevers with the force of a boot heel that was more of a shove than a kick.

He landed upon Jevers with all of his weight, slapping him dizzy. Then he stopped that as Jevers caved, not wanting to hurt the ornery, old jigger more than was called for.

The girl was still out and it worried Rusty. But Jevers was shaking his shaggy head dizzily and mumbling. Real tears came to the old man's eyes, trickled down his leathery cheeks and vanished in his beard.

"That I'd live to see the day I'd be blotch-branded for a sneakin' beef-snatcher," wailed old Jevers. "Me what's starved on wormy corn meal to stay honest. I ain't fightin' no more, an' I'm willin' yuh should take me for a fair hearin'. I wouldn't o' been salty in the fust place if yuh'd told what yuh wanted."

LOOKING at him, Rusty had the quick sense of believing that old Jevers was speaking the truth. He turned back to the girl. She was taking long breaths that didn't do her eye-filling figure any harm.

Rusty made his decision. Granted that old Jevers was clean, this was the chance he had wanted.

"Keep yore shirt on, Jevers," he advised quietly. "What I'm about to do is for your own good, and maybe mine. Who

is the girl? She's right pretty an' she's got proper spunk."

"Rita, my gran'datter," said old Jevers. "She's the spittin' image o' her ma, an' her dad was the son o' the high an' mighty Don Adrone what wunst owned the hull o' the valley."

Rusty might have guessed it was something like that, from the girl's startling blue eyes and her raven black hair. He had no time or respect for notable ancestry though.

"I'm tying her up to keep her safe and maybe give you a chance for your good name," he told Jevers as he looped slender ankles and then hitched the girl's arms immovably in his riata.

As he picked up the girl to carry her into the cabin, Rusty's skin tingled. That was overridden though by a sudden instinct that all of this was being watched. It turned his keen eyes to the rimrock.

He detected no movement, but the sense of spying eyes stayed with him. It caused him to talk low and fast.

"I'm doing as I was bid, Jevers," he said. "I'm wantin' you to ride with me. If you'll do exactly as I tell you, it may pin the cow-rustlin' onto the rightful hombre."

Old Jevers seemed to have lapsed into a dull acceptance of whatever Rusty told him. As he scanned the rimrock, Rusty told Jevers to get into the cabin and, as the old man shambled to the door, Rusty managed to stay between him and the rimrock.

He wanted no premature gunsmoke, and he was sure that there would be a try at gulching old Jevers somewhere on the trail between the Pothole and the Riata, where his four neighbors were supposed to meet them.

Helplessly bound in a chair, Rita awoke to misunderstanding and speech. At the moment Rusty was performing a peculiar operation upon the dazed and muttering Jevers.

Finding a pair of sheep shears, he had gone to work upon old Jevers' long beard and his shaggy hair. He had close clipped most of it when the girl spoke.

"When I get free, I'm going to kill you," she said almost calmly. "I'm going to hunt you down, Rusty Malone, as they call you, like I would any other poisonous snake."

Rusty hadn't known until then that blue eyes could turn to black agate with hate. He tried to grin at Rita, but he felt kind of sick.

"I'm leaving you here and I'm trying in my humble way to clear yore gran'pop of the suspicion of being in cahoots with a band of cow-stealin' killers," said Rusty.

"If'n it should be so, Rita," said old Jevers, rubbing a hand over his queerly shorn face and head, "it's fer the best. If'n Malone is runnin' a sandy onto us, I'll do the killin'."

"That clears that up," said Rusty cheerfully. "Come into the lean-to, Jevers. We're swappin' clothes, an' I'll enlighten you as to what I have in mind."

"You're an old fool to listen, grandpa!" cried out the girl. "Can't you see this lowdown jasper is meanin' to get you shot in place of him! That's it! He's being chased, an' he's figuring on you being mistaken for him!"

OLD JEVERS was full of surprises. He appeared to be stupidly half conscious of what was happening. Yet he looked searchingly into Rusty's eyes.

"Nope, Rita," he decided. "If'n he was bein' chased, they'd been whoopin' along by now. All-a my life I could look at any man an' know if he was a square-shooter."

"Good, Jevers!" approved Rusty.

"I still intend to kill him as soon as I'm turned loose," the gir' stated. "He's pullin' the wool over your eyes."

Rusty closed the door leading to the lean-to kitchen.

Some ten minutes passed, during which Rusty took time out to watch the rimrock through the lean-to window. If there was a furtive watcher up there, he lay low, as Rusty had imagined he would.

When they came back into the main room, Rita's eyes widened, but they still held only hate for Rusty. Rusty wondered within himself if it were true that hate is closely akin to what all at once

seemed to become a very desirable relationship with this girl.

"You're leaving me hog-tied like this and riding off with that red-headed woman-beater, grandpa?" exclaimed Rita. "If anything happens to you, I could be forgotten and starve to death."

Jinx Jevers grinned through his crooked, yellow teeth. His face was pinched with the years of scrubby living.

"If they's some'n honin' to gulch yore old gran'pop, which'n would he be drillin', child?" replied Jevers.

Rita apparently did not want to understand.

"I'm hopin' they don't shoot you, Rusty Malone," she said frigidly. "I don't want to be robbed of that pleasure."

Rusty smiled at her. It was a crooked smile, made more so by the change he had made. He was garbed in old Jevers' patched shirt and levis, with his greasy, ancient slouch hat pulled down over his eyes.

From under that hat, fastened inside the sweat band protruded the long shaggy hair of old Jevers. As long as he kept his chin down and the hat low, Rusty was the perfect image of Jevers, especially from a side or rear view at a little distance.

Reversing this, old Jevers was wearing Rusty's riding gear and his newer 'brero. In every way, except for his guns, Jevers would be taken for Rusty Malone.

"I'm hopin' I won't be lead-poisoned," said Rusty as he followed Jevers from the cabin and gave Rita a last look. "I'd be plumb disappointed at having you robbed of your pleasure."

RUSTY MALONE was well aware he was making a crazy, foolhardy play. From the moment he stepped from the cabin his back started itching. No telling but what an ambusher already waiting above the rimrock would have a nervous trigger finger.

He had first put the hint of suspicion upon Jinx Jevers. But now he believed Jevers to be innocent. Yet others of his four neighbors had come to an agreement with that suspicion.

If one of the four ranchers had been double-crossing the others, working with the raiding rustlers, the sudden demise of Jevers by lead-poisoning would seem to confirm the suspicion cast upon him and, at the same time, eliminate for a while further seeking for a guilty man.

Come to think of it, Rusty recalled that Harden, of the dark, shrewd face and calculating eyes, had suggested that Rusty tote his Winchester. As they reached the horses and mounted, with Jevers riding in the rear, and Rusty up ahead, as though Rusty might be a prisoner, a startling conjecture was completed in Rusty's mind.

Suppose Jevers had been gulched, it would mean more than likely that Rusty would fire his Winchester at the ambusher. Then when Rusty told the story of it, perhaps it would put more suspicion on him.

It might be argued that I gulched Jevers myself in order to make it appear he was guilty and had tried to escape, was Rusty's thought. Either way it would work, if the guilty hombre is one of my neighbors, he would still be in the clear to give the tipoff for another and final raid when the big drive would be made in two weeks.

This mixed thinking had Rusty's brain in a turmoil. Jevers rode behind him, and with Rusty's neater clothes the old man had come erect in the saddle. Moreover, Jevers was mounted on Rusty's horse, while Rusty was a perfect picture of long-haired dejection on Jevers' droop-eared, uncurried nag.

They rode that way into the trail that passed around the slope of the hogback. At one side were scores of vantage points for an ambusher. Anywhere in the two miles of winding trail to the top of the ridge above the Valley of Little Heaven, there were spots that seemed created especially for a straight-shooting gulcher.

Against the possibility of being drilled fatally, Rusty had only the extra keenness of his eyes and ears to protect him. His plan to make buzzard bait of himself had a two-way purpose.

First, believing Jevers innocent, he did not want the old man exposed to a killer.

Second, he hoped this might be a trap to bring the real renegade into the open.

To make the trap work, Rusty had to anticipate a shooting, if he could. Failing that, he had to survive an attack. It kept him riding crouched low in the saddle, Jevers' shorn hair fluttering from under his slouch hat.

JEVERS obeyed orders and did not talk. Rusty devoted his entire attention to the most likely spots for a gulcher. He had expected that all four ranchers would be riding to meet him.

One of the four would be forced to bring about a separation in order to turn gulcher, then have an alibi afterward. Again, it was in Rusty's mind that contact might have been made with the real raiding killers, and that the ambush might contain more than one slick gun hand.

"Guess I'm a danged fool to have tried it," muttered Rusty to himself when they had ridden a mile without interruption. "If the gulcher is smart enough, he won't miss with his first shot."

He had one thing in his favor. The brilliant sunlight lay upon all of the possible bushes and boulders. If he could keep his eyes jumping fast enough, he must certainly catch the glint of a rifle that would have to be pushed into the open to line him up as a target.

Like any hombre would, when time and distance passed and nothing happened, Rusty began to breathe easier. But it brought a new worry.

Suppose there was no attempt to gulch old Jevers?

When he came to the Riata and faced Longan, Donner, Harden, and Carlson, how could he explain his exchange of clothes with old Jevers?

And when he had exonerated Jevers of his own personal suspicion, where would that leave him?

Rusty's thinking was terminated abruptly. He was heading his horse into a short creek crossing with Jevers trailing closely. His faith in his eyes was justified.

He did catch the gleaming of metal in the sun. But it showed down in the creek gully and he almost missed it. The rifle cracked in the split second he was throwing himself over in the saddle.

Rusty realized the big mistake of his whole idea only as a bullet thudded into his shoulder. He went all the way out of the saddle, but caught at his own Winchester before he splashed into the shallow water.

He had counted on having open ground between him and the gulcher. Now he was confronted by a twisting line of willows and the uneven banks of the winding creek.

He caught the glint of metal again, however, under the belly of the horse. His own rifle and the other one crashed as a single shot.

Rusty could not tell if he had missed for the simple reason that this time the lead seemed to strike him a terrific blow between the eyes. Then he could see nothing as his face plunged under the water.

Consciousness lingered a few seconds, long enough for him to know that Jevers, mounted on his skittish horse, came splashing through the creek and went running out the trail toward the Riata. His breath was cut off by water and sand, and time went on without him.

RUSTY first saw his Winchester lying beside him. Then he saw the horse he had been riding, peacefully grazing at the top of the creek bank.

Swearing silently, Rusty guessed that the cold water had revived him. His scalp was grooved almost in the middle. But his skull had not been busted or he would have been dead.

That was simple enough. The rest was not so easy. He was alone. He judged he must have twisted his head instinctively to get his breath and that had been what saved him.

Then he saw the boot prints in the wet sand near where he had lain. His vision was still blurred but he made out the sign of three men who had stood there, apparently looking at him. They must have believed him dead.

Staggering back to the trail, he found where the three men had gone back to

their horses. He was a full minute realizing what had happened after that.

"They went back up the trail," he muttered, reading the sign where the horses turned. "And they started that way fast."

He was another minute figuring out why the gulchers had not headed back toward his Riata spread. The truth hit him hard. The gulchers must have been trailing him all the time.

"Then they know—they saw Rita—they still think I'm Jinx Jevers they killed and that means—"

Rusty stumbled blindly toward the grazing horse. When he had pulled himself into the saddle he could scarcely breathe.

He was thinking bitterly of having left Rita tied up and helpless in the Pothole cabin. It added up that the gulchers, believing Jinx Jevers had been liquidated would have to remove the girl to keep her from talking.

"They thought they had killed Jevers. and that old Jevers was me, Rusty Malone, riding hell for leather to the Riata to report the gulching," reasoned Rusty. "If the gulcher was one of my four neighbors, then he didn't know that Rita was with Jevers when I was sent to bring him in. That was discovered after I had reached the Pothole."

Rusty at this moment had not the slightest idea what he could do when he reached the Jevers' cabin. He forgot his headache in sickness over what he feared he might find there.

He was just turning into the clearing when the rifle shot crashed. His heart almost stopped. He imagined he might have been guessing wrong all the time.

The three riders might be all raiders who had been keeping an eye on Jevers. Could it be possible that Jevers had been their contact, after all?

Rusty rolled from his horse. There was a third rifle shot. Lead clipped leaves from a bush close to his head. He ducked and ran forward.

He threw himself flat, exclaiming in amazement.

"I've sure enough been spooked," he muttered. "Hell an' Maria! It couldn't be!"

Two bodies lay stretched in the clearing. Their huddled shapes were evidence of permanence. Then he saw what caused him to forget momentarily the shot that had narrowly missed him.

Rita was lying in the cabin doorway. She was fully exposed to any more gunfire. As Rusty cried out and started to run toward her, Rita cracked out another shot. Lead whined viciously off a rock close to Rusty. He remembered then that Rita had said she would kill him.

"Hold it!" he yelled. "It's me! Rusty Malone!"

The girl screamed at him, aiming her rifle at pointblank range.

"I know it! You got grandpa killed! I heard them brag!"

Rusty had no chance to get from in front of the Sharps. The rifle tongued at him and the lead burned through one shoulder as he tried to duck.

HE WAS smart enough to drop then, spreading his arms, lying as loosely as if the bullet had split his heart. Rita might be mad, crazed to the point of killing, but surely she would not shoot again if she believed him to be dead.

A 'brero appeared above the rimrock over the cabin. Rusty saw it. wondered if he dared risk pulling his own rifle into line. A face showed under the 'brero and a short gun thundered.

Rusty saw Rita twist about, jerk her rifle into line and shoot, all in a single movement. The 'brero of the killer fell off and whirled down the rimrock wall.

Rita evidently could still see the face at the top. For she triggered again after she had jacketed to put another load into the firing chamber. A metallic click was the only response.

The face remained queerly in view on the rimrock. Rusty knew then that Rita's one shot at the gulcher had found its target. Also he pulled in a long breath. Rita's Sharps was emptied.

Rusty climbed unsteadily to his feet. Rita appeared trying to speak, staring at him, but her curved red mouth stayed open without sound. It might have been

that she imagined she saw a dead man, Rusty Malone, whom she had killed, walking toward her.

He should have been bitter, but he was not. Not when he saw the spreading stain high up on Rita's left shoulder. And the way her legs were still bound together, which had compelled her to crawl to the doorway and lie there, gunning down the three gulchers who had attacked her.

"Yore gran-pop wasn't hit, Rita," said Rusty. "My hoss bolted with him when I was dumped from the saddle. By this time he's like as not on his way back here with help."

He reached down and took the Sharps gently from her hands.

"You'll have to let me bandage that wound," he said. "If I don't do it pronto, you won't be able to kill me again when I turn you loose."

She compressed her lips, as if she had no words to say. He picked her up and put her on a bunk inside. He brought water and found a clean cloth for a bandage.

His fingers tingled as he pulled the dress from her torn shoulder and washed the wound where the bullet had cut clean through close to her throat. His own speech was constricted as he saw what an inch to one side would have meant.

When the bandage was placed, she was still just looking at him.

"Lie still now," he said. "I have one chore yet."

When he returned, his mouth was grim. He had climbed the rimrock. As he came into the cabin he heard running horses. He made out Longan in the lead as the riders started into the Pothole clearing.

"Yore gran'pop is coming, will be here in a minute," said Rusty. "You'll have to put off killing me until some other time. If you want, Rita, I'll tell them it was me plugged the fella up there. He is the hombre who was using his own new riders as rustler and raiding the trail herds."

"I'm a fool, Rusty Malone, a crazy, wild fool," she said softly. "I've always wanted to live in the Valley of Little Heaven again, where I was a little girl. I've always hated the ranchers who took up the valley."

The riders were dismounting outside, exclaiming at the dead riders in the clearing.

"You'll always hate me then?" said Rusty slowly. "One of the ranchers is dead. He deserved to die. When you are well enough to kill me, that will be two gone."

He grinned at her. Striding steps sounded, coming to the cabin.

"Oh, Rusty, please!" She was sobbing.

"You'll get yore wish, Rita," said Rusty. "You're going to live in the valley again. With me, honey. Then I'll be around to kill if you should take another notion."

He had her tight in his arms when Longan and Jinx Jevers came into the doorway.

"Hell's bells, Malone!" exclaimed Longan. "Yuh knowed all the time it was one o' us? Them's 2-Dot riders that's been salivated."

"Yeah," said Rusty. "Carlson's up on the rimrock. I think we'll find the stolen cows without much trouble. He's the last one I would have suspected."

Rusty was still holding Rita in his arms. Her hands crept around his neck.

"Glory be!" cackled old Jevers. "The gal's plumb out'n her mind. She's mistooken yuh fer me, Malone. That's what comes of stealin' another man's hair. Now yuh got to be her gran'pop."

"I'm not out of my mind," said Rita quietly. "An' Rusty won't be a gran'pop until I'm a grandma. I'll see to that."

Your Government Asks Your Aid in Conserving Paper

Indians Still Peril the White Man!

ALTHOUGH hostile Indians have long since been subdued on the North American continent, our Latin neighbor-continent still must contend with the problem. This is particularly true in the jungle of the Gran Chaco.

There, hostile tribes still stalk the unwary prospector, adventurer, or explorer. It was into the hands of just such a tribe that a party of twenty adventurers fell in the winter of 1938. The story of incredible tortures and miseries through which these men passed was revealed when the leader, Arnaldo Thomasina, a Chilean oil prospector, and three other survivors were brought into the Paraguayan frontier post of Fortin General Toldeo in the Gran Chaco.

The men were the victims of jungle vengeance, a strange revenge in which a native chief invoked the Mosaic law of an eye for an eye. Except that he raised to ratio, forty to one.

The saga of the Thomasina expedition, as told by its leader, is one of the grimmest ever to come out of the silent jungle.

The party had pushed deep into the jungle in search of oil. They had not expected trouble from the Indians, although they had been warned. Heavily armed, and a large party, the men felt they could combat any danger. They did not realize their own squabbling would make them captives.

One night, when sentries were particularly light, the Indians struck. The adventurers were tumbled from their cots and bound tightly with liana bands. Then, with their bare feet prodded by chonta-wood spears, they were driven along the tangled jungle trail to their captor's communal village.

WHATEVER thought of ransom might have been entertained was instantly dispelled when they were brought before the native chief. He had only one eye, and that eye burned with the brightness of a blood-mad man. It was set into a painted, ferocious face. There seemed little likelihood of mercy being granted.

When the chief spoke, Thomasina and his party knew they were doomed. The chief's eye had been flicked out by a white man's whip many years earlier when the Indians had attempted to pass a horseman on a narrow road. Ever after the Indians swore vengeance and for years had been seeking unwary white men who dared brave the jungle mysteries.

To Thomasina and his men he meted out the same treatment he had given other captives. The twenty adventurers were thrown to the ground. Then wet rawhide thongs, with two knots in each piece, were placed over their eyes. The thongs were placed in such a fashion that the knots pressed on the eyeballs.

Little by little, as the rawhide contracted under the merciless rays of the sun, the men's eyes were crushed. Then, blinded and helpless, the party was led to the jungle to fend for itself. One after another they died, from slow starvation, from attacks by pumas and jaguars, from thirst and the maddening bites of insects. Finally only four, including Thomasina, were left. They lashed themselves together with vines and fumbled their way through the jungles.

It was thus that a patrol found them, led the survivors to safety. The Indian chief and his men were not found. Indeed, no effort was made to track them down; for in the Gran Chaco lurks death, silent and swift, to many who trespass on its secrets.

Perhaps after the war, authorities, using tanks and planes, may be able to wipe out the menace of bloodthirsty jungle Indians, but until then—beware the Gran Chaco!

BORN CURIOUS

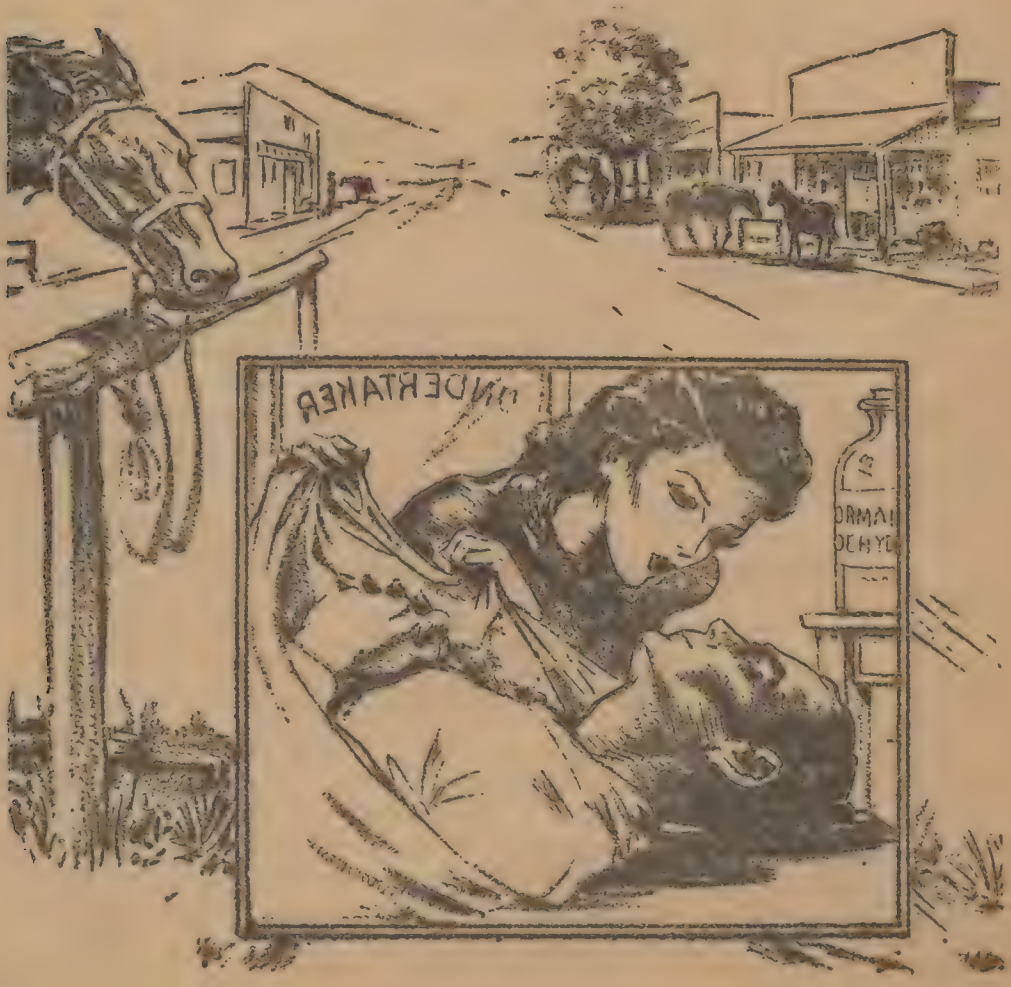
By RANDOLPH BARR

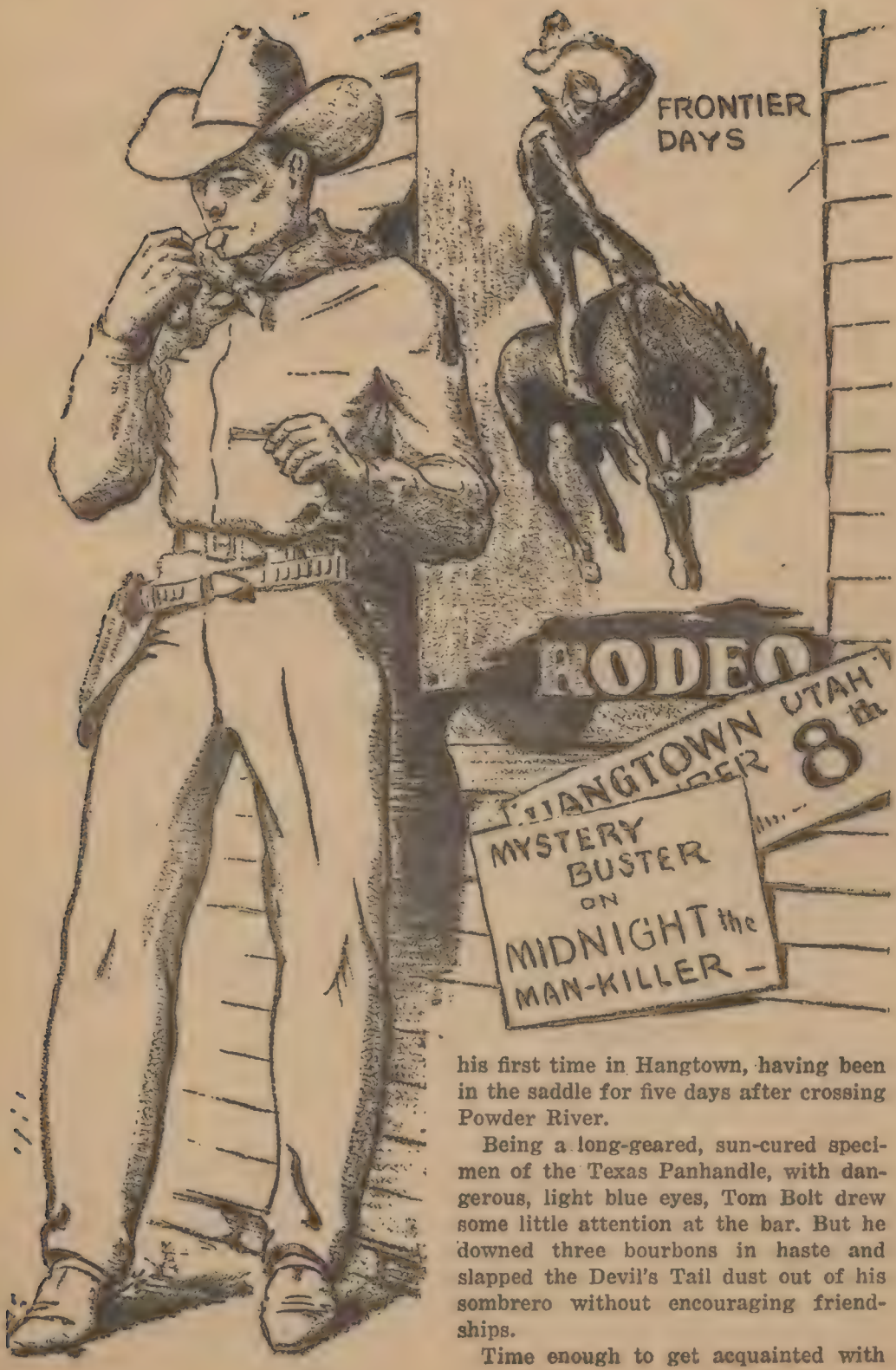
That rawhidin' rodeo manager wanted Texas Tom Bolt to be the mystery rider toppin' the mystery killer hoss—but it turned out that there was a heap more to it than that, includin' gun-slingin' corpses and rannicky revenge!

HANGTOWN was roaring and ruckusing its hearty celebration of the first annual Frontier Days rodeo. At least Hangtownites had hopes the event would be annual. This had been a good beef year and a top-price market.

Having ridden through the Devil's Tail desert to reach Hangtown in time to enter the riding, Tom Bolt slaked his thirst at the Royal Flush saloon. It was

"Be quiet now," Myra said. "Don't be hotheaded." Then she kissed him!





his first time in Hangtown, having been in the saddle for five days after crossing Powder River.

Being a long-geared, sun-cured specimen of the Texas Panhandle, with dangerous, light blue eyes, Tom Bolt drew some little attention at the bar. But he downed three bourbons in haste and slapped the Devil's Tail dust out of his sombrero without encouraging friendships.

Time enough to get acquainted with

Hangtown and the rich beef valley of Job's Basin county after he had listed himself as a rodeo contender. Tom Bolt was no great shakes at champ riding, but he was good enough to cop some money as a runner-up buckaroo.

So he had decided to combine his advent in Job's Basin county with the possible chance of adding to his thin roll of folding dinero. At the same time, he had been born curious, as he always said with a grin.

"Some day I'm takin' a pasear up Utah way an' meet this old Pete Merkle, who would have been my dad if my mom hadn't hitched up with the rooster who was my dad," Tom would say. "Old Pete must o' had it bad, 'cause he sent mom a gift every year while she was alive, an' he never double hitched with any other woman."

AS he took in a full breath after the bourbon warmed his brisket, Tom turned back toward the street. He eyed half a dozen oldtimers drinking at a table, and wondered which of these grizzled cowmen might know old Pete, or might even be old Pete himself.

"Time enough to look 'im up when I get my entry in," he muttered, going through the batwings.

The rodeo office was an old storeroom festooned with gala bunting. It was nigh closing time and the riding entries would be closed at midnight, about an hour from now, according to the notice Tom Bolt had read as he entered Hangtown.

"Reckon they won't be glad-handin' a newcomer, maybe thinkin' I'm a ringer," mused Tom as he stepped into the rodeo office with its one table being used as a desk.

There was but one hombre present, seated behind the table. This gent was red-faced and beefy of paunch. He looked up with a tired fixed smile. Tom was wholly unprepared for the sudden transformation in the man, the quick calculating look in his eyes and the welcome hand he extended.

"Tom Bolt?" exclaimed the rodeo man. "Yuh did say Tom Bolt, didn't yuh? An' that you've been ridin' a heap in the Southwest rodeo circuit?"

"Yeah, I said so," admitted Tom, his born curiosity telling him this hombre seemed to have heard of him, although his riding rep was only local in a couple of other states. "I'm wantin' to enter for the general events, 'specially the bronc-riding."

"Fine, mister, fine!" The red-faced man was rubbing his fat hands. He was also looking past Tom Bolt to the street, as if he feared some interruption. "Me, I'm Billings, the rodeo manager, an' we've got together a top show, if I do say it! An' you're just what I've been waitin' for an' had given up hope of gettin'."

The squinted eyes of Billings followed the lean length of Tom's body.

"I don't understand," said Tom. "Maybe I'm pretty good on the small-time circuit, but—"

"Lookee!" cut in Billings, stepping around the table and coming closer to Tom. "That makes it all the better, son. Now I can go ahead with an idea I've been mullin' over, but getting no place. First off, yuh ain't to enter as Tom Bolt. No sirree. Ain't nary one—say? Yuh ain't met up with nobody, have yuh?"

"Nope," said Tom, his born curiosity rising. "But what's that got to do with riding? I had another reason for comin' to Hangtown, an' I just kind o' figured I'd pick up some extra money."

"Fine! Fine! An' that yuh will! Lookit! First, yuh enter under the name of —lemme see—*Luke Long* will do as well as any. Y'see, fella, my idea's to have a mystery buster ride Midnight, the mystery mankiller. That's it—yuh enter as Luke Long, who ain't ever been heard of on any circuit, an' you'll wear a black outfit an' a mask, an' we'll whoop it up—"

"Whope, mister!" Tom ran long fingers through his shock of brown hair. "I'm just a fair rider. I ain't bustin' ary mankiller. Nope."

Billings edged closer, talked lower, and watched the street door.

"But that's the best o' it, Luke—callin' yuh Luke right off so's I won't make a mistake—this hoss Midnight has some

fire an' will give yuh a hard ride maybe, but he ain't the mankillin' breed, see!"

Tom Bolt didn't quite see. But being born curious, he was thinking hard. True, he was a complete stranger to Hangtown. Perhaps the only rider entered who was that.

He could be whooped up as a mystery rider, name of Luke Long. The ranny of having a mysterious supposed mankilling horse named Midnight would add some to the first annual show.

Billings might be throwing a straight loop. There was nary reason Tom could see why this was other than a lucky break for a complete stranger to Hangtown coming along just in time to maybe cash in on it.

Only he was curious to know why he could not have been made a mystery buckaroo under his own monicker of Tom Bolt?

HE was about to ask that when the one girl he had been waiting for all his life to see walked through the doorway. It struck Tom she was not the girl that Billings wished to see right now.

"Oh, Myra! Thought you'd gone for the night," exclaimed Billings. Then hastily, "Yeah, Myra! This here's Luke Long, pilgrim from up Montana way, an' he's—well, I hadn't told yuh, but I'm havin' Midnight ridden now as a mystery mankiller by a mystery rider, an' Luke Long's the rider."

Myra was tall and as slim and graceful as a new creek willow. Her eyes held unfathomable depths, a puzzled darkness as she looked at Tom Bolt. As if, thought Tom, she might have been expecting or hoping for some other galoot. Then she was holding out a slender, tanned, bronzed hand with fingers that clasped his warmly.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Luke Long," and Myra spoke quietly, but with a deep note in her voice that matched the question in her eyes.

Tom murmured something, aware only that Myra had the only mouth he had ever wanted to kiss right off. She turned back to Billings, and her blue-black hair had a lustrous shine where it cascaded over her shoulders.

"You mean, Billings, that Midnight is a mankiller, an' that's why you've kept him in the closed stall?" the girl said. "He's a beauty, that stallion, but is—I mean is Luke Long willing and a good enough rider—forgive me, but I've never heard of you in any of the rodeo news?"

Again Tom was dazzled by the deep, dark eyes turned upon him.

"That's why he's Luke Long, Myra," smiled Billings with his thick-lipped mouth. But Tom was sure his eyes were not smiling. "Don't mention to anybody tonight about this," added Billings. "I am sort o' keeping Luke Long under cover until the announcement of the first riding tomorrow."

"I see," said Myra, and her tone said she did not see. "Then I'll run along, Billings."

She turned fully toward Tom and smiled.

"And I'll see you again, Luke," she stated rather than questioned.

"You can bet yuh will," said Tom heartily, ignoring Billings' scowl.

"But after the first events tomorrow, Myra," said Billings, "I'm putting Luke Long up where the town won't get nosey ahead of time. Goo'night, Myra."

"Who is she?" asked Tom as soon as Myra passed through the doorway. "She work here or somethin'?"

"Keepin' the rodeo books," growled Billings. "She's studyin' to be a schoolma'am. But now you get your hoss quiet like, an' bring him along here. We'll ride out past the rodeo grounds, an' you'll stay with a couple o' friends o' mine who don't circulate much in town, an' who don't ask questions."

Tom had a question though.

"You ain't mentioned any dinero yet? S'pose I ride this Midnight, an' I make him misbehave like a mankiller, even if he ain't, I'm wantin' five hundred cash."

"Five hundred?" And Billings smiled. "You make it look good, an' I'll double that. C'mon."

WHILE one roughly bearded hombre in the shack two miles up a narrow, twisting canyon could be no older than Tom Bolt, he had furtive, watchful eyes and all the earmarks of a long rider. The other fellow was older, but resembled the younger one.

"Jack an' Shorty Legg," introduced Billings. "Jack, this is Luke Long, an' he's to ride Midnight in the show. Counted on you boys puttin' him up an' keepin' him under cover, seein' you ain't minded to be seen in town for awhile."

The brothers growled an assent, giving Tom a hard-eyed once-over. Jack, the younger, was wearing two guns. Another pair of guns hung on the back of a chair.

Before he had brought Tom in, Billings had gone ahead to the old cabin. He had talked for a little spell before calling Tom to come on.

Having been born curious, Tom played the cards as they fell. He had a notion it would be smart to dig his single .45 out of his bedroll and keep it with him. Billings was good-humored now, too much so. Tom did not have to ask if these Legg brothers were on the dodge. It was written all over them, in their furtive eyes, in the way Jack's hands constantly twitched toward his guns.

"I'll be ridin' up 'fore noon tomorrow," said Billings. "I'll have everything lined up to whoop up the riding of Midnight, the mysterious mankiller."

Tom did not miss the slow, twisted grin on Jack Legg's hard mouth, and the way Shorty Legg was sizing him up.

"I'll put up your hoss, mister," said Jack Legg. "An' bring in your gear."

Tom noticed that their own riding gear had been dumped sloppily on the floor.

"Guess I'll put up my own nag," said Tom. "I always look after Big Red myself. He's my ropin' hoss, an' he's edgy with strangers."

Billings had ridden away. Jack Legg protested, but went out with Tom and showed him where to stable Big Red in a shed where there were two other shaggy broncs.

"Know this hoss Midnight?" said Tom, keeping a wary eye upon Jack Legg. "Bad stallion, huh?"

"Don't know much about the beast," grunted Jack Legg. "He ain't ever been rode in these parts. Me an' Shorty ain't been about the rodeo grounds. We got reasons for holin' up awhile."

Jack Legg shut up then, except to say, "Yuh can take the bunk at the back o' the cabin. I'm havin' to do some fixin' up an old saddle here in the shed, an' you look beat out ridin' across the Devil's Tail."

"Yeah, I'm tired," admitted Tom, wondering if Jack Legg had only guessed at his having crossed the Devil's Tail desert.

He heard Jack Legg hammering on something, like he might be driving nails, as he went into the cabin.

"Have a swig, fella," growled Shorty Legg, offering one of two bottles of whiskey Billings had fetched along. "It'll make yuh sleep easier."

Right then Tom decided this whole setup was loco. He would have doubted even that there was a stallion called Midnight if it had not been for the girl Myra speaking of the horse.

He made only a pretense of drinking from the bottle. Perhaps he imagined it, but the whiskey had an offish, bitter taste. Now he noticed that Shorty had buckled on both of his guns.

In the meantime Tom had taken his own revolver from his bedroll as he spread it on the dirty boards of the bunk. While he had only mouthed at the whiskey bottle, he watched Shorty open a can of beans and heap a plate.

And he was aware that Shorty's narrowed eyes were watching him closely as he ate the beans. He was hungry and he cleaned up. When he had finished, he stretched his arms and remarked that he was sleepy and he guessed he would turn in.

"If I was smart," he thought, "I would make some excuse and shag out of this. The way Shorty is watching, he expects the whiskey he thinks I drank to do something to me."

JACK LEGG came in and picked up one whiskey bottle. But Tom noticed that it was not the bottle that Shorty had offered him. He was sure, too, that Jack

A steel-shod hoof numbed a shoulder, knocked Tom down.

half nodded to his brother, as if giving him some sort of a sign.

Tom began to have a queezy feeling. He was convinced that if he went to sleep now, he might not wake up when he wished. Yet he could not fathom any reason for all this.

He stretched out on the bunk, but did not pull off his boots. He had his .45 tucked under his belt, but realized it was but one iron against four guns in the hands of two men who had all the brand of killers.

His born curiosity told Tom to play this out. Find out what it was that had inspired Billings suddenly to cast him as Luke Long, a mysterious rider.

"Right after I told him I was Tom Bolt," mused Tom. "And he questioned me, repeating the name Tom Bolt? It could be that old Pete Merkle has mentioned my name, but why would Billings or anybody else want me out of the way?"

Tom feigned restlessness. Now was a good time to test out his position. If a ranny was being run on him, it would not be well to go to sleep. And, being weary with his hard ride, Tom was about to close his eyes in spite of himself.

The brothers still sat at the table drinking. They were still swigging from the same bottle. The other bottle, from which Tom was supposed to have drunk, had not been touched.

Tom yawned, swore violently, and his boots clumped to the floor. He had his hand ready for a quick draw, if it happened to be needed.

"I'm kind o' restless," he grumbled. "Think I'll take me a walk an' get some of the fog out'n my head. Make me sleep some better."

Tom was set for a quick play. One gun might not beat out four in the hands of two gunnies, but he could try. He swore at his own curiosity in letting things ride this far.

To Tom's surprise, Jack Legg spoke in what seemed a pleased tone.

"Reckon yuh are het up some about that hoss Midnight," said Jack Legg. "Whyn't yuh take my hoss, yours bein' beat out, an' ride down to the show grounds? They's a night hostler, an' he can point out Midnight's stall. Maybe so if yuh size up the stallion an' git acquainted, you'll rest easier."

Tom was agreeably surprised, and he nodded.

"Thanks. That's a right smart idea. You want to ride along?"

"Nope," grunted Jack Legg. "Me an' Shorty ain't showin' up for a spell. Yuh can take either nag, an' my saddle over there."

As Tom lugged the heavy saddle outside, the brothers were apparently shucking their guns and preparing to roll in.

"Guess I'm gettin' too edgy," muttered Tom. "No, dang it, I guess I will have a look-see at that Midnight hoss. They'd know I suspected 'em if I go back too soon."

Underneath, weary as he was, Tom Bolt did want to see this stallion that Billings had suddenly wanted to put into the rodeo as a supposedly mysterious mankiller.

THE old range tramp acting as one of the night hostlers at the rodeo tent stables evidently had not pretended to swig from a whiskey bottle. He had made a top job of it, and Tom Bolt gave up trying to break into his snoring.

Tom had followed the twisting canyon back to the grounds. He did not have to enter the town to reach the improvised stables. Twice he imagined he had heard riders pushing their horses fast on some trail not far from the crooked canyon, but he had given that little thought.

Late celebrants were still whooping it up in the town's open saloons.

Tom went along the tent stalls for the broncs until he came to a shed that had been closed in and converted into a tight box stall with a door fastened by a hasp.

It was darker here than among the tents where a couple of lanterns burned. There was no light about this stall, if it did house the stallion. Tom was fumbling with the hasp when he was startled and jerked his hand away.

This Midnight horse was restless, whether or not he might be a killer. For a stall board was suddenly almost splin-

tered by the drive of an iron shoe. The horse snorted inside and tromped about after that kick.

"Not so gentle, anyhow," muttered Tom. "If'n this ain't a crazy ranny, an' I'm gonna ride 'im, I'll be one up by getting acquainted. Never seen the hoss I couldn't make up to."

There was another resounding kick as Tom slowly opened the creaky door. He placed the stallion's tall, bulky shape in the inside darkness. The horse threw up his head and squealed, and Tom ducked, seeing that the stallion had his head almost in the opening door.

"Whoa, fella," half whispered Tom, taking it easy. "It's a'right. C'mon, boy."

He had two lumps of sugar in his hand as he stepped gingerly inside the dark stall. And he was sure that Midnight quieted some, his muzzle reaching out.

It was as if the stallion, that wasn't a mankiller as Billings had assured, had been prodded by something that caused him to jump forward. Yet the kicking blow that smashed the side of Tom's head had all the force of being driven by the stallion's hindfeet.

Not that Tom had time to think of this. For he was knocked down, landing in the straw almost under the stallion's feet. The horse might not be a mankiller, for any terrified beast would have cut down then with his shod hooves.

Dizzied and sick, feeling warm blood bathing the side of his neck, Tom tried to roll clear.

One steel-shod hoof numbed a shoulder and knocked him down again as he struggled to his hands and knees. Midnight squealed with scared rage, striking with his forefeet and lashing out with splintering force at the back of the stall.

Tom was still able to roll, although blood was in his eyes and the world seemed to be spinning. Thus he had a vague glimpse of a human figure in the half light from outside as a man jumped out through the doorway.

Tom could not be sure, but he thought the man was holding a club in his hand. He was so dazed, he imagined it might be some stable hand coming to help him and ready to club the stallion.

Then a shod hoof caught him behind the ear. The stall door was being closed, shutting him in with the maddened beast, as Tom dropped into a well of blackness. He was an inert and unconscious bundle under the stallion's feet, dead to all pain.

THIS was like the final, timeless and everlasting ten seconds of riding a sunfishing devil of a leather-mouthed bronc. Tom Bolt's backbone seemed snapping up to click against his front teeth. The turmoil of hot, congested blood roared in his ears.

A chubby but troubled face floated over him. A face that had no forehead, only a top stretch of shiny baldness. Another face was there, too, framed by black, lustrous hair, with a curved mouth that talked right into this last ten seconds of his mad ride.

"Will he make it, Doc James?" The voice was deep and full and like music.

The round mouth in the chubby face opened and the bald head shook slowly from side to side.

"Nope, Miss Myra, can't give 'im even a fighting chance. I told Billings he'd have to scratch off Luke Long. He won't last out the night."

Tom Bolt was close to the end of this ride. He thought he heard the crack of a gun, like it had exploded inside his brain. He had made that final ten seconds. This was it, and he had beaten out the time clock.

All at once everything was etched clearly in his thinking. He was speaking, weak and low, but speaking.

"I made it," he said. "Where's them damn' pickup men?"

The chubby face and the pretty one were suddenly closer to him. The owner of the chubby face had put a hot, sweating hand under his shirt.

"Well, I'll be damned!" The girl had called the man Doc James. "An' I told Billings Luke Long would be dead by midnight."

The girl was bending close. Tom Bolt whispered, "Myra? I made the time—I heard the gun—"

"Yes-yes, Luke—" Her voice broke.

"You must be quiet. You will live—I know now you'll live."

"By gorry!" exclaimed Doc James. "Forty-eight hours dyin', an' then he beats it. The second day of the riding. I'll have to hunt up Billings an' give him the news, as soon as I make sure."

Tom's mind had never worked faster. Billings? The rodeo manager with his Midnight mystery horse would be surprised. No. Billings must not be surprised. Why would he be surprised?

"Because Billings wanted me dead," said Tom's mind.

Then Tom heard himself speaking.

"Tell Billings I am dead—understand?"

Doc James was shaking his head. But Myra was quick.

"That's it, Doc James," she said. "Billings let on he was all broken up when Luke Long got hurt. But he wasn't. I can read him. He was glad, yes, glad. And I don't know why."

"Tell him I'm dead," repeated Tom, trying to lift his arms.

HIS muscles were numbed, slow to respond, but his arms were working. He tried his legs. His right leg was too stiff to be moved.

"Here, here, young fella!" said Doc James. "You gotta take it easy. You've been almost over the edge for two days now. I can't tell Billings you're dead. It ain't ethical."

Tom Bolt forced out words from thoughts that were mostly subconscious.

"The hoss Midnight—he didn't kick me—it was—Billings has to think I'm dead—Myra—my gun? Where's my gun? I've an idea—"

"For a galoot who's just crawled back into this world you do too much thinkin' an' talkin', an' I've gotta give you somethin' to put you to sleep—" Doc James was worried.

"No," said Tom Bolt. "I'm dead. I want my gun. Tell Billings I passed out—tell 'im—doc, don't put me to sleep again—I want Billings—to come in—to view the—the remains—and he will—"

This Myra was fast thinking.

"That's it, Doc James," she said spiritedly. "I told you I thought somebody ran away from Midnight's stall just before I got the stall open and found Luke Long in there. I've never rightly trusted Billings."

"Nobody in Hangtown ever trusted him," grunted Doc James. "But sayin' a man's dead when he's—"

"It's my life," said Tom Bolt, his voice and will growing stronger. "Doc James—when you have a death, where'd you put the corpse—?"

Again Myra tossed the ready loop of her thinking tongue.

"That'll do it, Doc James—we will move him to Rainer's store an' undertaking room—I think Luke Long knows what he is doing."

"I know what I am doing," said Tom slowly, carefully. "I want my gun. Take me to the laying out—but wait—this Rainer?"

"Joe Rainer's my friend," said Myra. "Doc James, there was a stranger came from Midnight's stall. Midnight quieted right down when I led him out after I saw Luke Long in there."

Tom tried to smile, but his face hurt too much to be sure if his grin was a success.

"I'll see that you have your gun, Luke Long," said Myra.

Tom halfway passed out then for a little while. But he could hear Doc James arguing. Finally Doc James consented.

"I'll do it, by hell! But if'n this don't work out, they'll be readin' my shingle in some other town."

"IS THERE something you want to tell me before Billings gets here, Luke?"

Myra's voice was soothing, but anxious. Tom Bolt wished he could move the sheet from over his face to see the girl. Perhaps he should tell her the truth about who he was. No. He would wait.

"I've nothin' to say, Myra, 'ceptin' I ain't Luke Long."

He heard the shuffling of booted feet on the bare boards outside the undertaking parlor of Joe Rainer, which was but a bare storeroom where the town mortician fixed up some bodies for boothill.

"I knew that—yes, I knew that," said Myra quickly. "But be quiet now. Don't be hotheaded. Please."

She pulled the sheet from over his face and kissed him full on the lips. Tom forgot for the moment that he was dead. The girl gasped.

"Goodness! For a corpse you're terrible."

Then she was gone, her feet moving swiftly, softly out of the dimly lighted, musty room of death.

Tom was lying rigidly inert. He knew now that one leg had been broken. It had been tightly bound in splints. But his arms had life pulsing through them. His hands were regaining their strength.

Doc James had said that he had suffered a concussion. That he had believed it to be a fatal fracture, with a bleeding that he could not stop. That accounted for the roaring that was still in his ears.

Like the thunder of congested blood during the final seconds of a hard ride.

Then Billings' voice boomed out in the echoing room. Tom did not dare try to see, but he could picture the bulky, red-faced rodeo manager, probably rubbing his hands.

"It's too danged bad, an' I'm blamin' myself for it happenin'! Only I never thought the jasper could think of going into Midnight's stall alone at night! It was a bad break, and I'm footin' your bill for a bangup funeral, Rainer!"

"That's a'right, an' I'll make it low, Billings," replied Rainer, the undertaker. "I've got some business up front in the store. You an' your friends can have a look at the corpse. Over there on them trestles."

Billings' voice seemed filled with choked sympathy. Tom made himself as nearly like a dead man as he could. He pulled in shallow breaths, knowing it would be but seconds to a showdown now.

If he could but guess why Billings had tried this shenanigans? Well, the clumping of other boots across the floor had told him Billings had brought at least two friends. Could they be the Legg brothers, Jack and Shorty.

But Tom was unprepared for Billings' sudden, amazing words.

"By the way, Rainer, 'fore you leave us," said Billings, "I'm wantin' you should meet up with Tom Bolt. You know, the young fella that Pete Merkle was allus spoutin' about 'fore he kicked off. He just rode in from down Texas way—"

For a long ten seconds then Tom's body and brain really were paralyzed. This was the beginning of the answer to Billings' quickly thought up mystery riding of the supposed mankiller Midnight.

It came to Tom that Billings' plan was perfect. He had died, as Billings now believed, under the wrong monicker of Luke Long. As Luke Long he would be buried, with such honors as Billings could supply.

Joe Rainer grunted something, and added, "I'll be back soon as I 'tend to them customers in the front store," and his footsteps died away.

There had been one muttering voice in that introduction.

"Pleased to meetcha—"

Tom would have identified that voice anywhere. Jack Legg. Now Tom could see the play. He could piece part of this together. Yes, Tom Bolt might look like anybody, being a total stranger to Hangtown.

But this tough gunnie, Jack Legg? How?

Billings spoke mockingly as Joe Rainer slammed a door going out.

"Don't you talk too much, Jack. Yuh look good enough with them whiskers off'n your face an' in them new trail clothes, but yuh gotta ride easy an' don't git to drinkin' or shootin' off your mouth."

ANOTHER voice spoke, and Tom's paralysis left him.

"Reckon Jack's got his rights, Billings. Didn't he think up nailin' a horseshoe on a board to make it look like that hoss had kicked this halfwitted pilgrim?"

"An' I'm gettin' you outta town pronto, Shorty," growled Billings. "Don't you an' Jack git ary idea you'll cash in more'n what I'm givin' yuh. Don't forget the damn' gal gits half o' her uncle's spread an'—"

"An' so you figger on hitchin' up with the gal," cut in the voice of Jack Legg

harshly. "Maybe so, me bein' Tom Bolt an' him bein' laid out cold, it changes things a mite, Billings. Shorty an' me was thinkin'—"

"A'right, a'right," grunted Billings. "An' you make one move to change it as I laid it down; an' I'll put yuh behind the bars myself, an' folks'll believe you passed yourself off on me as Tom Bolt. They ain't nary one to dispute that. Now let's have a look-see at Tom Bolt hisself, an' make sure."

Tom was not breathing. Not until he saw the red face of Billings through his slitted eyes.

"I'm here to dispute it, Billings," said Tom quietly.

He had counted on the sudden shock of this and it worked part way.

"Gawamighty!" gulped out Shorty Legg, and Tom saw the bearded brother standing with his hands hanging, useless for the moment.

But there was Jack Legg, dressed in new clothes, with a cold, killer's brain, and his hand streaking for the gun on his thigh even as he cursed.

Billings was startled, jumping back. And the sheet dropped over Tom's face before he could stop it. But the .45 snuggled at his side burned a powder hole through the winding linen, even as Tom felt lead pound into the splinted leg.

Jack Legg was a smart gunnie, and fast. Tom got the jolt of Jack Legg's weight that upset the trestles and sent the pseudo corpse thumping to the floor. Tangled in the sheet, Tom tried to free his gun hand.

The agony of his broken leg put a haze over his eyes. He could see the three figures of Billings and the Leggs, but they were all mixed up. All he could do was thumb the hammer of his iron, aiming promiscuously.

Jack Legg pitched toward him, his hands spreading and his freshly shaved face working with the coldness of death flowing into his punctured vitals. And Shorty Legg cursed then.

"Damn' if'n yuh didn't trick us, Billings!"

"No! No! Shorty, don't! I'll give yuh the price of Tom Bolt's half of the Pete Merkle spread! I'll—"

One crashing explosion of a six-gun put a period to Billings' frantic plea for his life. The rodeo manager was dying as he fell, but mumbling.

Shorty Legg's iron turned then upon the "corpse" he had come to "view." And Tom's gun gave a metallic click as it reached only empty brass in the turning cylinder.

Tom could only close his eyes, his stomach shrinking. The undertaker's storeroom for the dead reverberated with the explosion of a gun.

Tom was amazed to find he could still see.

And he saw Myra standing there, holding a cumbersome old .45 in her two hands. A thread of smoke still came from its muzzle. Shorty Legg was doubled beside his brother.

WHEN Doc James had dug out some lead and put new splints on Tom Bolt's busted leg, Joe Rainer's long, lugubrious face wore a funny smile.

"Dang my time, if'n I ever landed more undertakin' business sudden like," said Rainer. "Myra Conover, the next time you have a friend wantin' to play dead, you'll find me accommodatin'."

Myra Conover?

Tom was looking into the shining dark eyes. Old Pete Merkle had made a final gift to his mom this year. Dying, Pete Merkle had willed half of his big ranch to the son whose dad he might have been if mom hadn't met up with Tom Bolt's dad. The other half to this girl he had adopted, a former partner's daughter, Myra Conover.

Tom was remembering that kiss Myra had given him—no, to Luke Long.

"We wouldn't want to split up old Pete's range, would we, Myra?" said Tom hopefully. "I wouldn't be wantin' to take up half. I only come ridin' 'cause I guess I was born curious."

"An' I wouldn't have been believing I would know my man the minute I laid eyes on him, darling, or gone out to make sure Midnight wasn't a mankiller if that hadn't been so," said Myra gently.

Animals Well-Armed

OUR globe-trotting army will probably come home with many tales of adventure and romance. Some will want to relate an incident of the fighting front; others will probably talk about the weather, how it rained for days without let-up, and how the sun-baked roads had become seas of mud. Still others may talk about the strange animals or insects that it was their fortune, or misfortune, to meet. For it is generally true that the animals away from home are bigger and more grotesque, and that the insects are often much larger than it had previously been thought possible the civilized man could endure.

Probably the soldier who comes home from somewhere in South America will have stories to tell about the Peruvian llama. Though the stories will seem exaggerated out of all proportion, they will probably be true. For one of the quaint habits of a Peruvian llama, when it takes a dislike to a person riding it, is to stop dead in its tracks, twist its head around and, with considerable force and excellent aim, eject a portion of its acrid saliva upon the unlucky rider.

How unpredictable these llamas are is illustrated by the antics of the one at the London zoo who had developed a strong objection to top hats. Whenever a top hat got too near the llama, its unfortunate owner would receive a charge of malodorous saliva, delivered with the force of a garden hose, full on his offending headgear.

BUT the boys who are campaigning in the tropics will have the best stories to tell. There they will probably meet up with the seven-inch chameleon, which can capture a fly twelve inches away without moving. For his artillery consists of a tongue longer than himself, a lightning-like, sticky-tipped weapon which is shot out of the mouth in much the same way as a machine-gun bullet.

Probably the fellow who fought against the Japs in the Malaysian jungles will want to tell about the archer fish of these regions. This fish shoots its insect prey with pellets of water. The deep groove down the roof of its mouth becomes, when the tongue is placed along it, a natural blowpipe, and the fish can expel water in single drops or in a continuous jet. Its vision is so keen that it can pick out small insects lurking in the vegetation along the banks of a stream, and usually one or two pellets, fired with anti-aircraft gun accuracy, bring down the victim.

Although it is very doubtful that any of our soldiers will care enough for lizards to watch their habits, there may nevertheless be some hardy ones who will have observed some of them from a safe distance. They will discover that certain lizards are equipped with one of nature's strangest safety devices. When danger threatens, these lizards operate special muscles and ligaments which perform a bloodless amputation and leave their highly colored tail flipping about on the ground behind them. The severed tail will squirm and wriggle for about an hour, and while the lizard's pursuer is investigating it, the owner escapes and very shortly grows a new tail.

It is quite possible that, after this war is over, our boys will be glad to content themselves with the rattlesnakes and copperheads of their own back yards.

KILLER HANGS

The Poco Kid had been born bitter, and time hadn't improved his temper any. He hated the sight of a law star for a very particular reason, and he had sworn he never would be a lawman. Yet here he was, ironically wearing a law badge and apparently an honest gunner-downer of every law-breaker who crossed his trail. However, things are seldom what they seem, and the face of destiny wears many masks to deceive both those who are shrewd and those unwary!

★ ★ ★

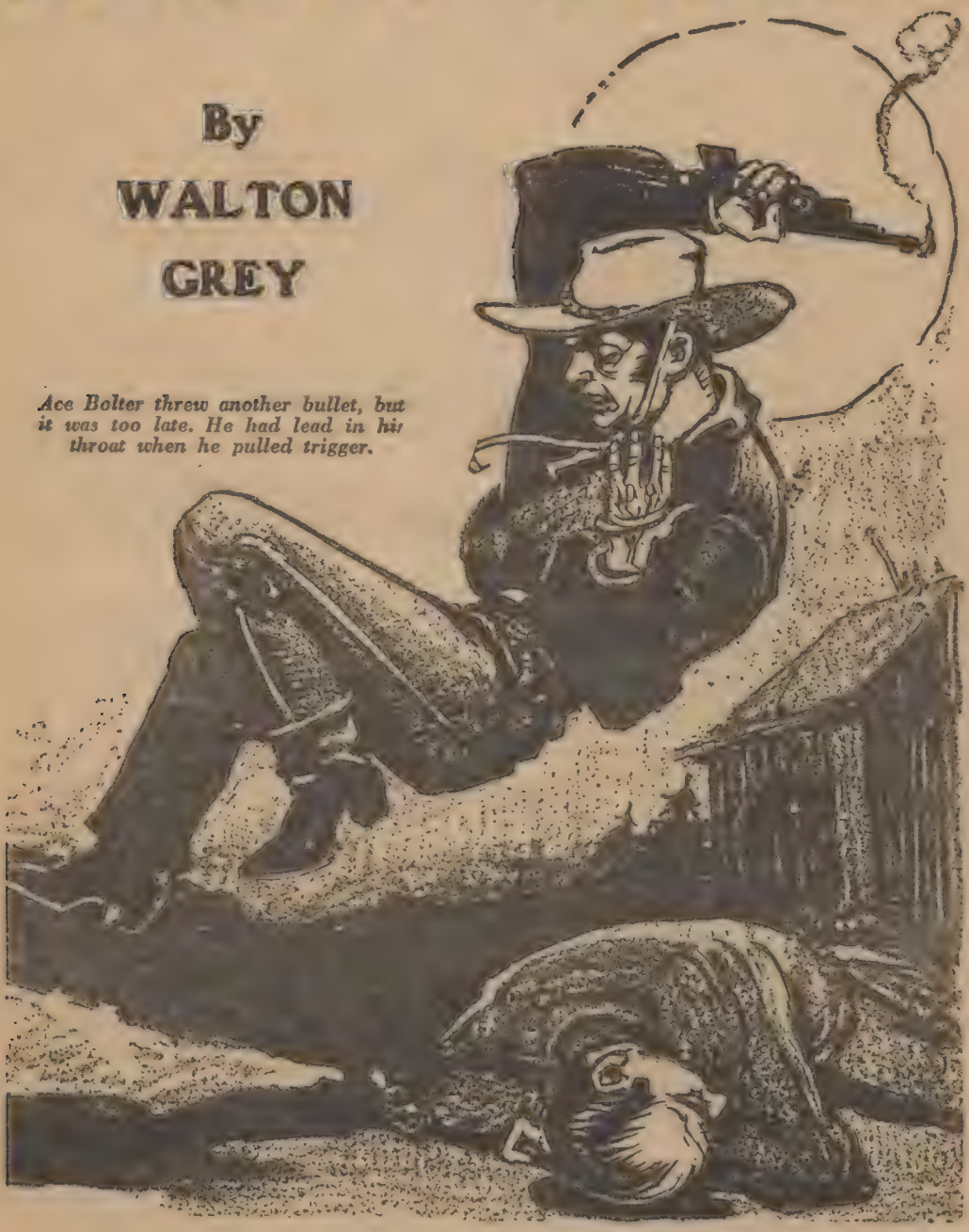
HE polished the bright metal star on his spotted deerskin vest with the cuff of his plaid wool shirt. The star reflected the light of the full moon that had just come up to stand like an immense yellow globe of fire on the ridge of the Beartooth mountains.

"Me, the Poco Kid, totin' a lawman's badge," he grunted to the mettlesome, fidgety paint horse he bestrode. "Ain't 'at a laugh."

But the Poco Kid's voice was too bitterly edged for laughter. He had been caught up by one of life's little ironies,

A LAW STAR

By
WALTON
GREY



Ace Bolter threw another bullet, but it was too late. He had lead in his throat when he pulled trigger.

even if he would not have understood the meaning of that language. He put it in his own illiterate fashion.

"Yup, pa was wearin' his rightful when he was gutshot an' toted home dyin'," muttered the Poco Kid. "An' 'en ma made me swear on the Book I wouldn't never be no lawman like him, 'at I'd never be a law rooster with a badge. I ain't been neither, but 'em yaps in Crado gawked at me for two days as if'n I was."

He rubbed the law star some more and pulled his vest out to see it better.

Then his hands eased the weight of his pair of low-slung sixes and he shifted in the saddle.

Besides the big moon and the shine of the law star, there was but one other light in the misted and murky valley under the Beartooth. This shone in the window of a squat little cabin. Beyond the cabin was a rough pole barn.

"Guess that jigger Joel Smith is havin' his chuck by now," remarked the Poco Kid. "Puny sort to be pullin' the wool o' a big galoot like Quince Salter until he's willin' to hire ary gun-swift an' pay a clean thousan' jest to take Joel Smith out'n the way o' doin' him harm."

THE POCO KID talked to himself like that through long habit. Mentioning his mother, Ma Harper, aroused little or no sentiment. He had been a button of twelve when his father had been killed in the line of duty as sheriff. Ma Harper had followed Pa Harper to the family plot on a "hardacre" farm a year later.

Drifted at thirteen, the Poco Kid had almost forgotten that he had such a family name as Harper. Now, ten years later, the Poco Kid was mentioned and cursed, and hated and feared in four or five states, from Jackson's Hole to Sante Fe.

Needless to say, he had not violated his boyhood oath never to become a lawman. He had never even considered being a law rooster with a badge. But this was the end of the second day he had been the badge-toting deputy sheriff, appointed by Quince Salter, mayor of Crado, owner of the stage line and the bank, and also the owner of several thousand acres of prospective graze land here in Beartooth basin. Salter was all set to hog all basin water for his acres.

"You'll be recognized by everybody in Crado as the lawful deputy, me having talked around about sending for a tough law-bringer by the name of Harper," was what Quince Salter had told him when he had arrived. "You've got one job to do. This squatter Joel Smith an' a dozen others like him won't listen to reason.

"They've grabbed the best water side of the Beartooth. When I told 'em how this big dam I'm plannin' would easy make twenty times their holdings prosperous on the other side of the ridge, they was too stubborn and dumb to see it. Even when I promised to give them a passel of it equal to what they've been grubbin' and starvin' on."

The Poco Kid had listened, not understanding all of it. But he could see in Quince Salter's little, weasel eyes that he would not be giving away one inch of ground that belonged to him.

The Poco Kid had never been one to give away things to others either. He took what he wanted here and there. But not like Quince Salter Not with pompously righteous words and a pretense of doing good to others.

No. The Poco Kid had taken what struck his fancy openly, with his guns. That was why Quince Salter had sent for him. Salter had learned of the Poco Kid through two gun-swifts he already had on his payroll, neither of whom could have posed as a deputy sheriff before the townsmen of Crado.

Both gun-swifts had notched their guns too quickly in Crado to be now accepted as lawmen by the town. The Poco Kid was a stranger and the grin on his lean, young face made him acceptable.

So now the Poco Kid rubbed the law star, watched it shine under the yellow moon, and keened his eyes upon the shadows nigh to the pole stable of Joel Smith. He had neither seen nor heard them, but he expected Ace Bolter and Slim Jones to be somewhere in the vicinity of the stable.

"This is the day before Christmas," Salter had told the Poco Kid. "Joel Smith has been in Crado all afternoon spending a dollar or two of his Winter's grub money on junk for his damn' kids. He'll be driving out to Beartooth at dark. You'll trail him, but keep out of sight.

"Bolter and Jones will take the other trail out there about the same time. They'll cache the ten thousand in one of the mangers in Joel Smith's stable.

You'll give Smith time to get set in the house, an' then you'll ride up, Harper. From there on you know what to do."

Yes. The Poco Kid knew what to do. Joel Smith was not to be killed. He was not even to be lamed with a bullet unless he put up a fight against the law—the law being the shining star pinned onto the Poco Kid's vest.

"Joel Smith's the leader of them damn' squatters," had been Salter's words. "You'll nab him dead to rights with the money stolen from my bank hidden in his stable. I will have been tied up in my own bank by this masked holdup, but your yarn will be that you saw him run out of the back of the bank, and you trailed him home."

THE POCO KID kept his eyes upon the stable and the light in the Joel Smith window. He had no sentiment, no conscience in this gun chore to bring in Joel Smith.

"Guess pa would be right proud of me," mused the Poco Kid, his mouth twisting into a grin. "Yup. I'll be liken to a real lawman, tellin' in court how I follered this jigger an' seen him cache the money stole from the bank."

He judged it was about time for him to ride down the hill and make known the presence of a law badge at the door of the Joel Smith cabin. But as he gathered in the reins of the fiddle-footed horse, the cabin door showed a square of light. This closed and another light came bobbing slowly up the hill.

The Poco Kid slipped from his beast, tied it to a small pine where it could graze for a few feet and soft-footed across the hill among stunted trees and heaps of rock.

A bobbing lantern showed stoop-shouldered Joel Smith. A thin-faced kid of ten or so padded alongside him. Joel Smith toted an axe in one hand.

A short distance from the Poco Kid the lantern was handed to the button. Joel Smith sighted around.

"Think this'n make you an' sis a right nice Christmas tree?" said Joel Smith. "Picked it out your ownself, didn't you, Johnny?"

The small boy's voice was choked and eager.

"Yeah, pa. That's the one. Ain't much big, but it won't make what we're gittin' look too little, I thought."

"Your ma tell you how it was, Johnny?" The Poco Kid could tell Joel Smith must be tuckered from his trip to Crado, his voice sounding very tired.

"She didn't hafta tell me, pa," said Johnny. "Didja git the hair ribbons for ma with the pennies the teacher gi' me for takin' his hoss to pasture?"

"Yeah, Johnny. They'll look real bright in the tree, all red an' green."

"Ma's been colorin' the popcorn she saved from last year, but she don't know 'bout the ribbons, does she, pa?"

"No, Johnny, she don't know," said Joel Smith.

He was tired, but he slashed at the small fir tree with a stroke that made the Poco Kid think Joel Smith's mind might have been upon Quince Salter at the moment.

"Sis cried when ma wouldn't let her pour any more taller for the candles," said Johnny. "She burnt herself some. That's why I had to tell her she'd git shoes from the store on the tree an' not hafta wear them sheepskins ma made for her any more when it's cold."

The little fir tree toppled. Joel Smith swore, but the Poco Kid guessed it was about the sheepskins Johnny had mentioned, and not at the tree.

WHEN Joel Smith had gone back down to the cabin with the fir tree on his shoulder, the Poco Kid went back to his horse. He saw a match flicker twice near the pole stable and knew the time had come for him to ride down.

The Poco Kid rode up to the door and reached over with his knuckles. Joel Smith opened it and looked out.

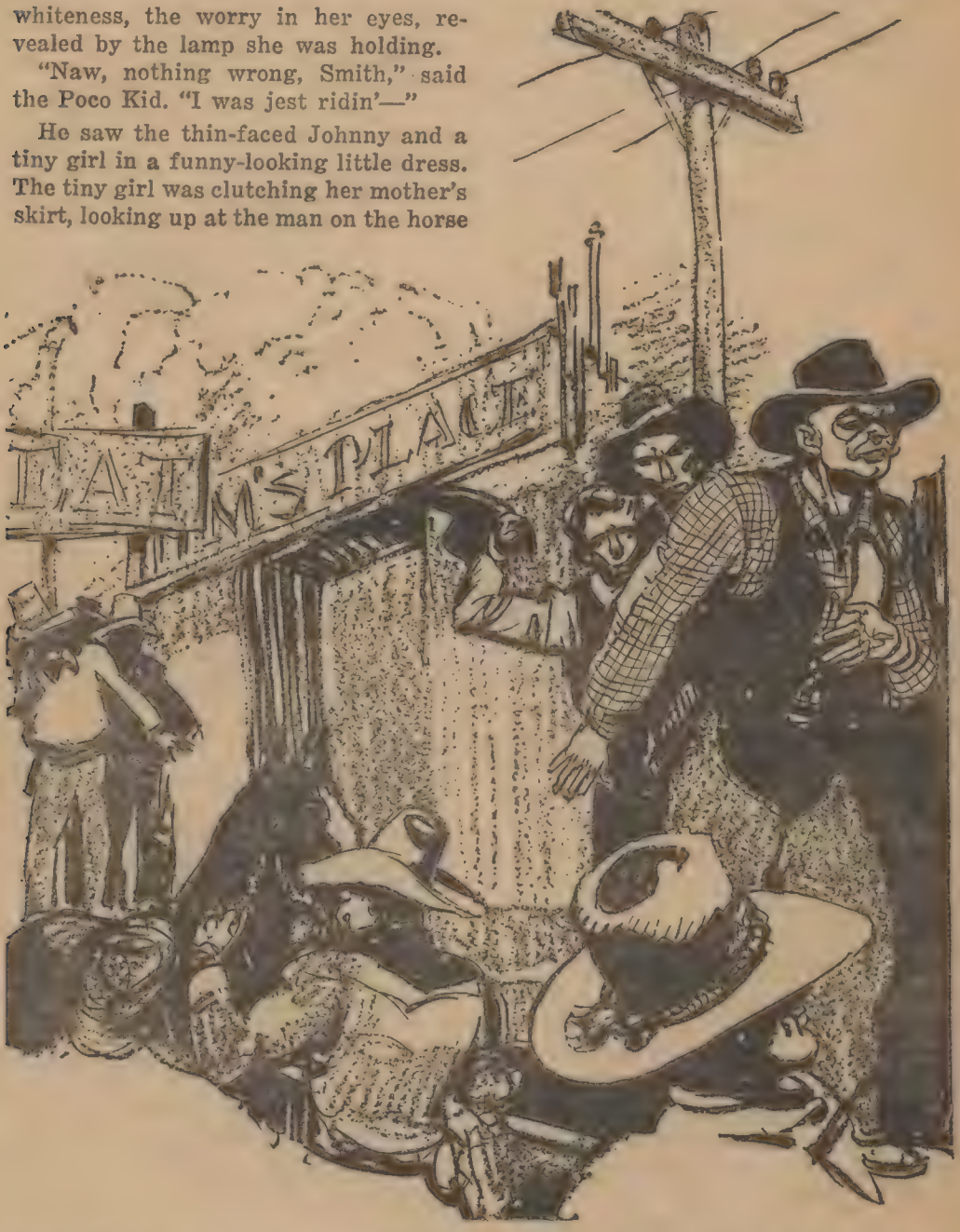
"Yeah? What's up? Oh! You're that new deputy, Harper. I saw you in town this afternoon. Somethin' wrong?"

The Poco Kid had only a vague memory of his mother. But it was funny how the anxious face peering over Joel Smith's shoulder was like that faint recollection. Possibly it was the strained

whiteness, the worry in her eyes, revealed by the lamp she was holding.

"Naw, nothing wrong, Smith," said the Poco Kid. "I was jest ridin'—"

He saw the thin-faced Johnny and a tiny girl in a funny-looking little dress. The tiny girl was clutching her mother's skirt, looking up at the man on the horse



with eyes too big for her baby face.

Anyway, the Poco Kid stopped in what he had intended to say about Quince Salter's bank being robbed. He had to think fast, make up some story until he could get Joel Smith alone.

"Jest ridin' out to see if I could pick me up another nag," said the Poco Kid. "Somebody told me folks on the Beartooth was havin' to sell some hosses. My beast's been goin' lame on me."

Joel Smith said: "Don't know as any in the valley can spare a hoss, Mr. Harper. Can't think right off—"

"Joel," said the white-faced woman gently. "Ain't you forgettin' your manners? It's a cold ride out from town. Ask Mr. Harper to light down. I could find him a cup of hot—"

Joel Smith laughed. But it wasn't a

Quince Salter opened his trap of a mouth, but no words came from his dry tongue as he licked at his lips and saw the Poco Kid's hands on his guns.

good laugh.

"Ma, we ain't nothin' but roasted wheat for coffee, an' Mr. Harper is used to—"

The Poco Kid did not know why he wheat for coffee, an' Mr. Harper is used o' wheat coffee, ma'am. Useter like it when I was a kid, but ain't had none in a long time."

The coffee substitute was hot, and the Poco Kid could drink it because he had been somewhat chilled, waiting on the hill, waiting for the moment when he would ride down and call Joel Smith out to the stable.

Johnny's eyes were bright and blue. The little fir tree had already been set up in a corner of the bare, single room of the cabin. A few strings of molasses dipped popcorn lay on the table.

"I'll fry you some corn dodgers, Mr. Harper," said the frail woman, stirring the fire and putting on wood. "It's all—"

"Gee, ma'am, they ain't nothin' I'm as hungry for as a good corn dodger," said the Poco Kid.

"After tonight's gone, it's Christmas," said the little girl suddenly, then chewed her thumb bashfully, but added, "An' if you was stayin' over pa's got two rabbits for a stew."

Joel Smith had been studying a knothole in the floor. He looked up and straightened his shoulders. He was like a man who had come to a decision.

"Johnny, you fix sis for bed," he said. "Come to think on it, Mr. Harper, I've a right upstandin' mare, four years old, maybe I could let go at a fair price."

The woman's pale lips moved but she did not speak with her tongue, only with her eyes. The Poco Kid didn't know much about women. But somehow he could understand that she was telling Joel Smith not to sell the mare he had mentioned.

"But, Johnny, ma said I could stay up an' see the trimmin' on the tree an' the candles lighted, an' the star—"

This was the little girl, her big eyes floating in tears. And Johnny spoke in a low tone, but scolding a bit.

"After a while, sis. But we ain't no star, 'cept the paper one I cut out, an' I don't think it'll stick in the tree."

Joel Smith spoke hastily, "Yup, I'll bet you'd like the mare, Mr. Harper. She's frisky on Winter feed. I ain't much work, an' I can use the other horse."

Joel Smith had but two horses. The Poco Kid got that.

He put down a half eaten corn dodger. It was time to get on with the gun chore he had been paid to do. This Joel Smith wouldn't put up a fight.

THE POCO KID laughed inside. Quince Salter must be loco, him thinking this shiftless squatter, with his family half starving on corn dodgers and burnt wheat coffee, could fight a big galoot who wanted to build a dam and had the money to hire gun-slicks.

Had plenty to pay a thousand to have Joel Salter brought to jail and got out of his way.

Well, the Poco Kid thought of the thousand. He could use it. He had been on the dodge when this had come up. And he could see, as he looked at it now, how he would be doing Joel Smith's kids a favor.

If he took Joel Smith away, something would happen to get them out of here where their pa had kept them starving. The Poco Kid felt sorry for such a shiftless jigger. He bet Joel Smith's missus would have the spirit to find some other place, see that her kids had plenty to eat and a better place to live.

The Poco Kid shoved back from the table. He felt of the handcuffs on his hip. He would get this over as soon as possible. He guessed he wouldn't make much of a fuss about it. No use to have the kids bawling and the woman maybe begging for Joel Smith.

No. He was glad Joel Smith wanted to, or rather had to, sell a horse. They would go out to the stable. He would have a saddle put on the mate, and then he would just belt Joel Smith over the head, handcuff him, load him on his own nag, and start for Crado.

"Mind if'n I look at the mare, Smith?" suggested the Poco Kid.

Joel Smith got up wearily. The wom-

Do You Know That

1. Since the war started, 23,000 U.S. and Canadian lumbermen have left the forests and gone into the armed forces or war plants.

The work these lumbermen did—like topping trees—is out of most people's line. It requires a high degree of skill, nerve, and strength, and thus the 23,000 lumbermen just can't be replaced today.

More than two-thirds of our wood supply is used for vital building needs, including ships, barracks, military roads, etc. There's not much the average person can do to conserve that lumber. But the other third goes into wood pulp, from which paper is made—and there is a great deal we can all do to conserve paper.

2. Not only has the supply of paper gone down—the demand has enormously gone up. The armed forces use an amazing quantity of paper and paper products. For example, 700,000 items—including food, clothing, and weapons—must be wrapped or boxed in paper for delivery to the Army. And the armed forces use great amounts of paper in communications, ammunition, V-mail, camouflage, manuals and blueprints. (Incredible as this may seem, it actually takes **175 tons** of paper to make blueprints for **one** of the big, new battleships!)

3. You might not guess it, but one of our largest users of paper is the American home. Uncle Sam says that if the enormous needs of our armed forces are to be filled, we should do our level best to limit home use of paper in all possible ways—to accept unwrapped packages when shopping, and to be careful never to waste a single piece of stationery, towels, tissues, napkins and such-like. This is a wartime emergency. Can the government count on getting your valuable aid in conserving that one log out of every three that makes your paper?

4. Though all U.S. magazines use but 4% of our paper, they present a double opportunity for you to help. First, pass along your copies to a friend. Second, turn all used magazines and newspapers in to local salvage agencies. **Old paper can be used to make new paper.**

an's eyes pleaded with him, but he did not look at her.

"Sure, Mr. Harper. Wait till I light the lantern."

It was Johnny who spoke up suddenly.

"But, pa, how're you gonna plow for corn an' taters come Spring?" said Johnny. "Pa? You said us valley folks'd never let Salter put up that dam, an'—"

Joel Smith's head snapped erect.

"You, Johnny, be quiet! An' Mary, you've been eye-winking at me about sellin' the mare! It ain't 'cause I'm quittin'! We'll use half what it brings for grub, an' the rest will go—"

"I know," said Johnny. "We're buyin' more powder to blow the hell out'n that dam—"

"Johnny!" It was his mother. "That'll be enough! Take sis an' go to bed!"

The Poco Kid had looked at Joel Smith's erect head and straightened shoulders with some wonder. For the first time he sensed that Quince Salter might be right in believing he had to remove Joel Smith.

It was a new experience to the Poco Kid. What he wanted he took. Here was a puny jigger, with only some ribbons for his missus and maybe a pair of shoes for a little girl to put on a Christmas tree, and he would sell off an animal he sorely needed to buy dynamite to fight the biggest and most ruthless galoot in Crado.

"I hope you don't pay what Johnny said any mind, Mr. Harper," said Joel Smith. "Yes, I have been saving some powder. I hope it won't come down to that. I don't want to go against the law, unless Salter does it first. But so help me, the folks in this valley ain't gittin' out for him or no other livin' man, as long as we have our breath."

Not being a real lawman, the Poco Kid felt foolish for perhaps the first time in years.

"Ain't none o' my put in, Smith," he said curtly. "Let's go see that mare. Likely I won't be a deppity come time for that dam to be started."

A worn gun belt with a holstered six hung over a chair back. But Joel Smith was starting out without it. The Poco Kid thought it would be better if this squatter had his gun when he took him into Crado.

"Hain't yuh wearin' yore iron, Smith?" he suggested. "Seems I heered in town they was some don't like the way yuh part yore hair."

"Nope, I don't bother with it out here," said Joel Smith. "I only keep it handy for a crack at a snow rabbit or a quail when they come around."

The Poco Kid couldn't think of any argument. Joel Smith walked out with him to the pole stable. The Poco Kid took his horse along. He wanted to be sure he had no reason to return to the cabin after he had belted Joel Smith over the head and trussed him up for the trip to Crado.

THE POCO KID had a notion that Ace Bolter and Slim Jones would be sticking around to make sure that he didn't vamoose with the ten thousand from Quince Salter's bank. Supposedly stolen dinero being used as bait to condemn Joel Smith in the eyes of Crado.

The Poco Kid saw the shadows of two horses tied down by the creek because he had his eyes keened for them. Joel Smith was deep ir his own thoughts of selling off the beast he needed for plowing, and walked ahead, his shoulders stooped again.

The mare was a good animal. The Poco Kid took in the beast's points, but his mind was fixed upon his other chore. As Joel Smith led the mare out into the lantern light, the Poco Kid had picked up an empty gunny sack.

He edged close to Joel Smith. When he belted him between the ears, he had whipped the gunny sack around his gun barrel. Joel Smith crumpled without so much as a groan.

The Poco Kid laid Joel Smith on loose straw where the inside of the stable was blackest. He found the package of folding money in the second manger. He slipped it inside his shirt.

Right here the chore of the Poco Kid was changed from what had been intended by Quince Salter. There was a

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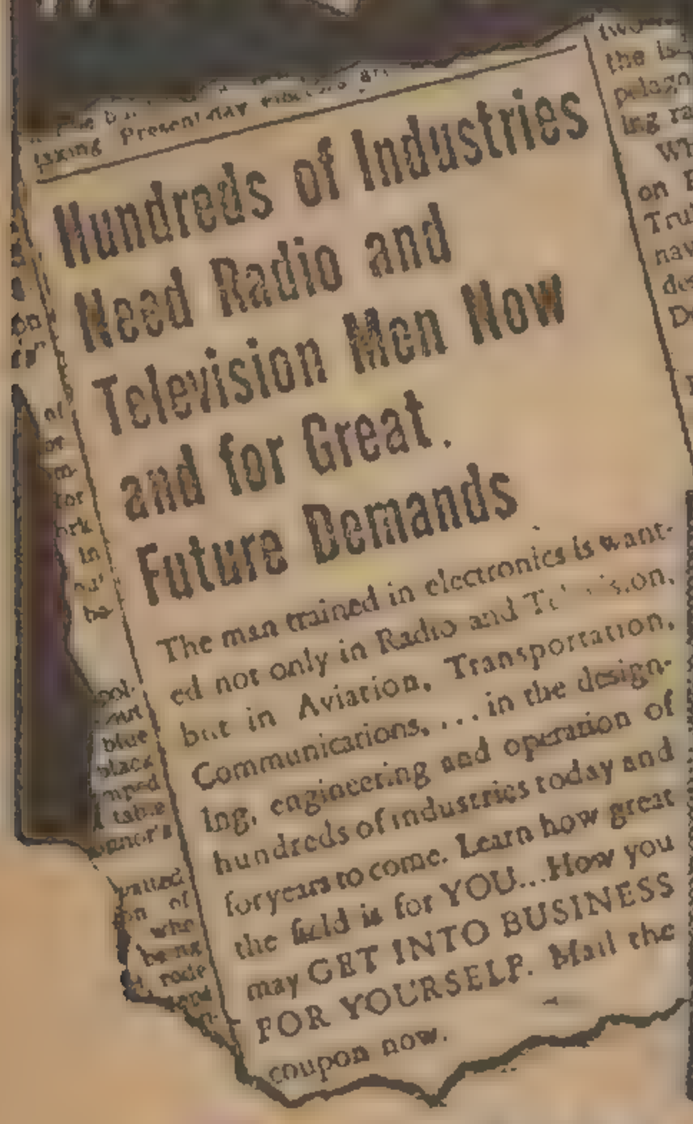
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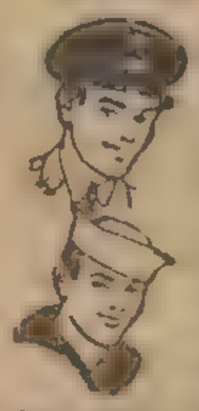

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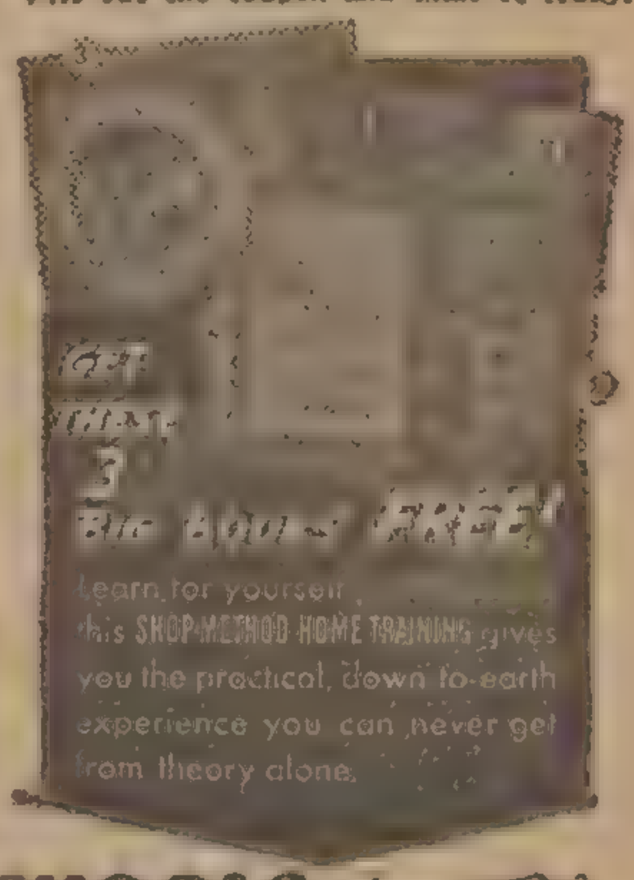
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tight grin across the mouth of the young outlaw.

Instead of handcuffing Joel Smith, the Poco Kid holstered his gun, picked up the lantern and moved openly toward his own pinto. He paused beside his pony, pulled the handcuffs from his hip, and let them clink to the ground.

Here it was that the Poco Kid proved up on his long record of dodging the law. He had survived because he had graduated in six-gun smartness. He had apparently been exposing himself through begging too dumb to know that Ace Bolter and Slim Jones had him under their guns.

The Poco Kid set the lantern on the ground a few yards from his horse. Moving as if to mount, he was sure the conflicting light of the lantern and the moon made him an uncertain, shadowy target. He had to chance that much.

The first gun flamed nearer than he had expected. The bullet nipped at his vest.

Another gun blazed over to one side. Its lead whispered past his face.

The Poco Kid staggered back, threw out his arms and fell to his face. His skin crawled as he thought the two gun-swifts might make a surer finish of it by drilling him on the ground.

But Ace Bolter and Slim Jones were boastful of their shooting.

"Knowed he'd double-crossed the boss!" grunted Bolter, as the pair strode toward the Poco Kid. "Salter'll add the Poco Kid's thousand to our five hundred."

"Seems like we could light out with all o' the ten thousan'," said Slim Jones. "We could bury the Poco Kid an' swear he got away from us. Or we could light a shuck ourselfs."

"Yuh ain't smart," growled Ace Bolter. "It'd be the last time we'd ever be hired to sling our guns. We'll take the bank money in an' that'll put Salter where we can git what we want off'n him for as long as we hone to hang around."

"Yeah," said Slim Jones, stepping over and drawing back his boot to make a kicking test of the Poco Kid's demise.

The boot toe missed the ribs of the Poco Kid. The lead from the Poco Kid's gun set Slim Jones down with his foot still lifted for the kick. Thereupon Ace Bolter threw another bullet, but it was too late. He had lead in his throat when he pulled trigger.

The Poco Kid heard Joel Smith's missus and Johnny crying out. They came running from the cabin, with little sis toddling after them. The Poco Kid holstered his guns.

"Joel? Joel?"

"What's it? Where's pa?"

THE white-faced woman was frantic with fear. Johnny was making a brave effort to keep Joel Smith's six-gun from shaking in his small hands.

"They was two gunnies tryin' to steal yore hosses," declared the Poco Kid. "They knocked out yore pa, Johnny. He ain't hurt bad, ma'am, an' he's in the stable. Yuh'd best take the lantern an' see to 'im. I had to salivate 'em two."

The trembling woman took the lantern, running into the stable. Johnny and sis trailed after her. Sis was crying, rubbing her eyes. The Poco Kid saw she was wearing sheepskin pads on her small feet.

The Poco Kid worked fast and smoothly. He could hear the woman sobbing, trying to revive Joel Smith in the stable. He brought up the horses of the gun-swifts, quickly lashing their bodies across the saddles.

Johnny came running from the stable.

"Ma sent me for water," said Johnny. "Pa's breathin', but he ain't talkin' yet."

The Poco Kid rein-hitched the burdened horses to his own pony. He followed Johnny into the cabin.

"Yuh kin do writin' good?" he said to Johnny.

"Yeah—yeah, but I hafta git the water for pa."

"Take only a minute, Johnny," said the Poco Kid. "Want yuh should write somethin' pronto for me to put my mark onto."

Johnny got a stub of a pencil and some white paper.

"Put down, to all an' sundry," said the Poco Kid. "I'm sellin' my bay mare

to Joe Harper for cash money an' I'm agreein' to keep an' feed the same ontil he's wantin' the mare. Me, Joe Harper, is wantin' the mare to be kept."

Johnny stared at him as the Poco Kid put a cross mark on the paper.

"Run along with that water," said the Poco Kid. "I'm leavin' the cash money in the Christmas tree. An' Johnny, tell yore pa to use the mare for plowin' if'n I ain't showed up come Spring. An' spend the dinero for grub, 'cause he won't be needin' no more powder."

"Johnny? Hurry with that water." His mother was calling.

"Yup, yuh hurry, Johnny," said the Poco Kid gruffly.

When Johnny was gone he hurriedly separated a thousand dollars from the Salter folding money.

"Me bein' rightfully 'titled to the same," he grinned, as he pushed it deep into the branches of the fir tree.

The Poco Kid was but ten seconds finishing another little chore he thought of suddenly. Then he sashayed out to his waiting pony and the two horses with their grisly burdens.

Joel Smith was on his feet, talking, as the Poco Kid pushed the three horses into a fast walk crossing the creek into the trail toward Crado.

THE POCO KID had tangled his loop in a new brand of warfare. He wouldn't have known the meaning of the word *psychology* if he had met it face to face. He knew only that he had tackled something that could not be written off in gunsmoke.

The pair of now voiceless gun-slingers flopping limply across their saddles had supplied the idea.

"Slim Jones was opinin' him an' Ace Bolter should take a wide *pasear* with all—a Quince Salter's bank loot," mused the Poco Kid. "It'd add up to the same as if one o' 'em had done it, if'n that'n didn't show up in Crado."

He recalled an old mine shaft not far outside the town. With his mouth set grimly he permitted his recollection to have its way with him.

The eager voice of Johnny: "Didja get

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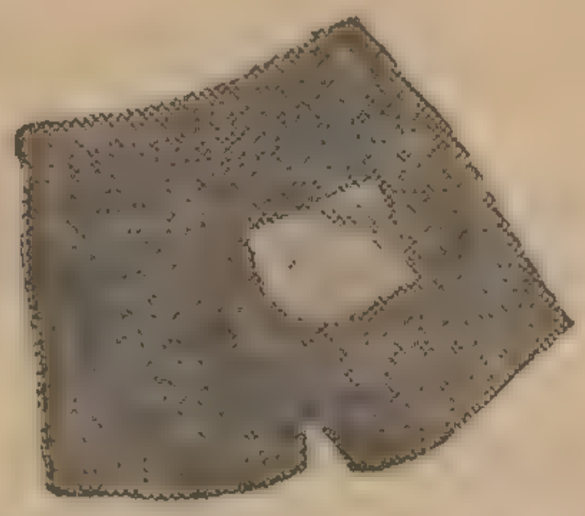

Before you spend a penny in wartime, ask yourself, "Do I really need this? Or do I have something now that will do?" As you patch and darn, you keep prices down.

or do without!

When you put your money in War Bonds, in savings, in taxes, in insurance—you're helping to fight the war and build a sound, stable nation for the peace to come.

It's your money you're saving when you help keep prices down. For it's buying too much when there's too little to buy that sends prices up. And when prices go up—and keep going up—your savings, your future, are in danger.

How can you help keep prices down?

By never spending a thin dime you could turn into a War Stamp. By thinking twice—and thinking "No"—at every urge to open your purse.

By wearing old things out, making makeshifts do. Remember, it's the things you *don't* buy that keep prices down!

See that prices go no higher...

Be a Saver—not a Buyer!

A United States war message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

the hair ribbons for ma with the pennies the teacher gi' me for takin' his hoss to pasture?"

The prattling of sis: "After tonight's gone, it's Christmas, an' if you was stayin' over pa's got two rabbits for a stew."

The Poco Kid pulled up the corpse-weighted horses in the darkness below the old mine shaft near town. He made certain that Ace Bolton's nag was securely tied far enough off the trail to be missed by any chance rider.

"It's a heap decenter buryin' than yuh got comin'," he said as he slid Bolter's body into the deep hole of the old shaft. He added, "A heap decenter than ary o' us gun-slicks has got comin'."

Half an hour later he rode into Crado. Much of the town seemed to be milling about in the light cast by the lamps of the Take-a-Chance saloon. There were lights in Salter's bank and office across the Winter muck that was called Main Street.

"Salter's makin' right sure they's a bunch o' townies on hand," grinned the Poco Kid. "Be smart to know for true what yarn the big galoot's been spillin'."

The Poco Kid rode slowly and quietly behind the north row of buildings. He dismounted behind the bank, carefully tying the horse carrying the mortal remains of Slim Jones. Then he circled the bank and general store, before riding into view of a couple hundred citizens.

Quince Salter was holding forth in the door of the bank. His weasel eyes drilled into the Poco Kid. A hard smile showed on his thin-lipped mouth. The Poco Kid pushed his pony through the crowd and reined up.

"Where you been?" demanded Salter of his personally appointed deputy. "You know my bank was robbed?"

This was as it had been agreed between them.

"Yup, I seen it bein' done," replied the Poco Kid, and the crowd pulled in its collective breath, waiting.

"You saw it, Harper?" said Salter. "Maybe you'll say you've been chasing the holdup? Maybe you'll tell us he got away?"

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We asked 5 foolish women why they don't check ceiling prices

"The storekeeper might get mad"

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. . . "It's too much trouble"

It's well worth the trouble to check price ceilings—if it holds prices down, cuts your bills today, lessens the danger of inflation tomorrow.

"We can afford to pay more"

Every time you pay black market prices, you're helping to send prices up—that's the way inflation comes. And *nobody* can afford inflation

"My store doesn't display ceiling prices"

All retailers will if you keep asking them, "Is this the ceiling price?" Ceiling prices must be displayed wherever goods under ceilings are sold.

"I just don't want to do it"

No—and our boys don't want to fight! But they're doing it—magnificently! It's up to you on the home front to do your part to head off rising prices.

Check and be proud! You should be proud if you're the kind of loyal, patriotic American citizen who never pays more than ceiling prices, who pays her ration points in full, who shares and plays square with scarce goods!

It is because of you and millions of women like you—cooperating with American merchants—that the cost of living has gone up only 7 per cent since your Government's price control started.

But the end is not yet. So keep up the good work. Ask *every time*, "Is this the ceiling price?" Never buy a single thing that you can do without. Save your money—in the bank, in life insurance, in War Bonds. When you use things up, wear 'em out, make 'em do, or do without . . . you're helping to HOLD PRICES DOWN!

YOUR STORE WILL BE GLAD TO HAVE YOU ASK:

"Is this the ceiling price?"

A United States War Message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

"Nope, Salter. I nabbed 'im cold."

"Well, where is he?" Salter could not keep a note of gloating out of his voice. "The gun ruffian come in an' jumped me from behind. He knocked me out an' tied me up. I didn't so much as get a glimpse of his face. Who is he, Harper?"

The Poco Kid eased his guns on his thighs, taking his time.

"Maybe yuh heered his voice, Salter?" he said cautiously. "If'n so, yuh'd know the jigger."

"Nope, he clunked me out with his gun," replied Salter. "I've been sayin' I didn't either see or hear him."

THE POCO KID relished this moment. He had cleared the way for his announcement.

"They was two of 'em, an' only one went in the bank," he said slowly. "T'other'n was holdin' the hosses. Didn't savvy it rightly ontil I seen the one come out an' pull a mask off'n his face. An' 'en while I was gittin' my paint, they lit out hell for leather."

Quince Salter had stiffened, staring at the Poco Kid.

"Two of them?" he said slowly and the Poco Kid knew he wanted to yell out this was a lie, but that would only loop him up in his own story. "But there was only one—I mean I didn't hear or see—well, there could have been two."

The Poco Kid could read murder in Salter's little eyes.

"Yeah, two of 'em," drawled the Poco Kid. "Did they git any dinero much, Salter?"

"Get any?" shouted Salter. "I figure there's nigh ten thousand missing!"

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed the Poco Kid. "'En Ace Bolter was totin' all-a the loot! An' he got plumb away in the shoot out when I downed Slim Jones! Wisht I'd knowed it! Even so, Bolter was out o' sight, headin' for the border whilst I was still tradin' lead with Slim Jones."

"Ain't no catchin' him if he had that much start!" growled a nearby towns-

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Pockets are good places to keep hands warm.

Pockets are good places to hold keys . . . and loose change for carfare and newspapers.

But pockets are no place for *any* kind of money except actual expense money these days.

The place—the *only* place—for money above living expenses is in War Bonds.

Bonds buy bullets for soldiers.

Bonds buy security for your old age.

Bonds buy education for your kids.

Bonds buy things you'll need later—that you can't buy now.

Bonds buy peace of mind—knowing that your money is in the fight.

Reach into the pocket I invented. Take out all that extra cash. Invest it in interest-bearing War Bonds.

You'll make me very happy if you do.

You'll be happy too.

WAR BONDS to Have and to Hold

This is an official U.S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council

man. "You bring in this Slim Jones! They was both mean gun-slingers!"

The crowd was eyeing Quince Salter. No man there said it openly, but it was in their faces that they knew Salter had hired Ace Bolter and Slim Jones for his personal war on the Beartooth squatters.

The Poco Kid spurred his pony around the bank.

"I brung 'im in," he said as he came back with the horse bearing the body of Slim Jones. "An' he didn't have ary a dollar onto 'im."

The townsmen drew into a circle around the tied corpse.

The Poco Kid rode close to Quince Salter. He leaned over in the saddle speaking low so that only Salter could hear.

"I'm hereby resignin' as depitty," said the Poco Kid. "I'm ridin'. But I'm not ridin' so far I won't be knowin' what goes on in Crado. Yuh dassent change yore yarn, Salter."

The Poco Kid rubbed his thumbs caressingly over the stocks of his low-slung guns.

"More so, Salter. Yuh ain't buildin' 'at dam on Beartooth. If'n I hear yuh've laid one stone or hired one gun-slick to pester 'em squatters, I'll be ridin' back to Crado for a speshul chore."

Quince Salter opened his trap of a mouth, but no words came from his dry tongue as he licked at his lips.

The Poco Kid reined his pony around. Several townsmen looked at him curiously.

"Yuh quittin' as deputy, Harper?" said one of the nearest. "Where's yore law star?"

"I'm quittin'," said the Poco Kid flatly. "I wouldn't be su'prised if that law star is hangin' at the top of a Christmas tree."

His heels touched the paint. He hummed a sort of tuneless song as he rode out of Crado. When he had picked up Ace Bolter's horse, he was heading for the border himself.

The Poco Kid had neither sentiment nor conscience.

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